

# **The British motor industry, 1945-77:**

## **How workplace cultures shaped labour militancy.**

**Jack Stacy Saunders**

**Thesis submitted for a PhD in History, June 2015**

**University College London**

## **Declaration**

I, Jack Saunders, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

Car workers' union activism has long held a strong grip on popular memories of the post-war period. Working in the quintessential industry of modernity, and as the "affluent worker" *par excellence*, their labour militancy has been linked to narratives of economic decline and of rising working-class living standards. Yet despite their centrality to understanding of this period, historians have often given their workplace activism superficial treatment.

Seeing this period as one where class solidarity was eroded by the rise of "privatism", scholars have been unwilling to see novelty in collectivism. Consequently, car workers' capacity for collective action has often been taken for granted, with mobilisation attributed to a combination of uncomplicated economic motivations, the last gasps of a declining "traditional class consciousness", and the effects of the post-war settlement.

Existing study has thus suppressed the changing forms of agency and subjectivity expressed by labour militancy, something this thesis rectifies by considering workplace activism in the motor industry as a specific historical creation of post-war Britain, rather than a reflection of "tradition". Studying the processes by which workers built their union cultures, I look to discern the origins of the shop-floor organisations that were established in the 1950s, and explore the capacity of car workers to generate new solidarities and collective values in this period.

Turning to the 1960s and 1970s this thesis examines in detail the social practices and cultural norms that emerged from organisation, aiming to understand how worker activism shaped the agency of car workers in post-war Britain, influencing the forms that strike action took. Finally, using a mixture of oral history interviews, letters, meeting minutes and periodicals, I look at the meanings workers attributed to industrial conflict, asking whether factory activism generated attitudes distinct from the dominant values of wider British society.

# Contents

<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Trade union militancy in post-war historiography	11
Agency and subjectivity	21
A social and cultural history of the shop floor	35
<b>Chapter Two: Car workers and public discourse 1945-79</b>	<b>43</b>
The new estate of the realm 1945-53	45
The case for reform 1953-63	49
Wrecking the nation 1968-79	61
Conclusion	72
<b>Chapter Three: Organising the car factories, 1945-65</b>	<b>76</b>
Trade unionism in the motor industry before 1950	79
Organising in the 1950s	93
From shop to factory	117
Conclusion	144
<b>Chapter Four: The social practices of shop-floor unionism 1964-77</b>	<b>147</b>
Piecework and shop bargaining in the mid-1960s	152
The limitations of sectionalism	166
“Regaining control by sharing it”: 1968-75	180
The problems and opportunities of factory trade unionism	217
Conclusion	221
<b>Chapter Five: Militancy, attitudes, values and rationalities</b>	<b>224</b>
Mainstream values and workgroup autonomy: 1964-68	227
The introduction of productivity bargaining: 1968-71	247
Productivity bargaining and the high tide: 1970-74	258
The social contract: 1974-77	285
Conclusion	299
<b>Chapter Six: Conclusion</b>	<b>304</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>317</b>

# List of Illustrations

## Chapter Two

Figure 1: *Daily Express* cartoon: “Out! Out! Everybody Out!”

Figure 2: *Daily Express* cartoon: “Help! Send the police! Lord Stokes has written a four-letter word!”

Figure 3: *The Sun* cartoon: “Ere! How did that car get on the assembly line?”

## Chapter Four

Figure 4: Note for Longbridge Works Convenor “The men walked out.”

Figure 5: Note for Longbridge Works Convenor: “Men in the West Works are getting restless.”

Figure 6: Mass meeting on Stoke Green, Coventry.

Figure 7: Record of vote on whether to strike in protest at *In Place of Strife*

Figure 8: Record of vote on whether to strike in protest at *In Place of Strife*.

# List of initialisations

AEU / AEF / AUEW : Amalgamated Engineering Union (1920-68);

Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers (1968-1970);

Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (From 1970).

BL: British Leyland.

CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain.

IS: International Socialists.

JSSC / SSC: Joint Shop Stewards Committee / Shop Stewards Committee.

MAC: Management Advisory Committee.

MATJSSC: Motor and Ancillary Trades Joint Shop Stewards Committee.

MDW: Measured Day Work.

NUVB: National Union of Vehicle Builders.

SLL / WRP: Socialist Labour League (1959-73), Workers Revolutionary Party  
(From 1973).

TUC: Trades Union Congress.

TGWU: Transport and General Workers Union.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Between 1945 and 1977 Britain experienced a changing pattern of industrial conflict, with strikes increasing in frequency and number of participants, particularly between 1968 and 1974.<sup>1</sup> The same period also saw the emergence and re-emergence of many tactics previously absent from industrial relations, including political strikes, mass pickets, and factory occupations.<sup>2</sup> These were accompanied by an unprecedented expansion in union membership and activism, with a 250 per cent increase in workplace representatives between 1961 and 1980.<sup>3</sup> Alongside their union leaders, shop stewards emerged as one of the public faces of trade unionism, developing new organisations with increasingly complex functions.<sup>4</sup>

These developments left a mark on Britain's political culture which remains powerful to this day, reflected in the centrality of industrial unrest to recent popular depictions of the period.<sup>5</sup> In Britain's broader cultural and political life, the idea that strikes and excessive union power bore heavy responsibility for a period of prolonged economic stagnation continues to be an important part of popular narratives about contemporary history and the state of modern Britain. This could be observed in the obituaries for Margaret Thatcher in 2013, which

- 
- 1 J.W. Durcan, W.E.J. McCarthy and G.P. Redman, *Strikes in Post-War Britain : A Study of Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes, 1946-1973* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 174; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The High Tide of Trade Unionism : Mapping Industrial Politics, 1964-79', in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol.2 : The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 93–130 (p. 122).
  - 2 McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide', p. 109; Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 195.
  - 3 Chris Howell, *Trade Unions and the State : The Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain, 1890-2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 122–123.
  - 4 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 122–123.
  - 5 Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency : The Way We Were : Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went out : Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber, 2009); Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? : Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008).

made repeated reference to the supposed neutering of trade unionism that took place under her government, often juxtaposed with the “bad old days” of the 1970s, when the country was beset by the ‘rapacious demands of all-powerful trade unions barons’.<sup>6</sup>

These narratives echo the interpretations of labour militancy popular at the time. The idea that over-powerful unions were a key problem for the nation was reflected in a multiplying literature diagnosing Britain’s “decline”.<sup>7</sup> As national politicians and the media became increasingly concerned by the capacity of organised workers to disrupt production, influence national politics, inconvenience the public and damage the economy, industrial relations became a regular feature in political debate. Industrial unrest and the supposed obstructionism of trade unionism figured heavily in the emergent discourse of “declinism”, which became prominent from the late 1950s and sought to discern the underlying causes of Britain’s perceived economic and political decline.<sup>8</sup> Writers like Michael Shanks and Andrew Shonfield, then later Correlli Barnett, Douglas Jay and Samuel Brittan, made the inadequacies of trade unionism central to their diagnosis of Britain’s apparently deteriorating economic position, holding unions responsible for the inefficiencies of public corporations, lack of private investment, resistance to change in industry, low productivity in manufacturing and high levels of inflation.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond its connection to declinism, labour militancy in this period also features

---

6 ‘Nothing Less than a State Funeral Will Do’, *Mail Online* <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2306102/Margaret-Thatcher-dead-Nothing-state-funeral-do.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015].

7 Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline : Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 84–86.

8 Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline*, pp. 55–57.

9 Michael Shanks, *The Stagnant Society : A Warning* (Handsworth: Penguin, 1962); Andrew Shonfield, *British Economic Policy since the War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958); Roger Middleton, ‘Brittan on Britain: Decline, Declinism and the “Traumas of the 1970s”’, in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. by Pat Thane, Hugh Pemberton, and Lawrence Black (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 69–95; Roger Middleton, ‘The Political Economy of Decline’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), 573–86 (p. 577).

in debates over other trends in British history. Both at the time and subsequently, scholars and commentators linked workplace conflict with other key historical themes, such as the salience of class and occupation as identities, as well as other widely-discussed phenomena like the effects of the post-war settlement, changing gender roles, immigration and debates over “affluence” - the phenomenon of rising post-war working-class living standards. Involving participation in social and political mobilisation on a grander scale than any other associative culture, trade union activism potentially offers an important window into many working-class people's experiences of these developments. However, despite its continuing importance to popular perceptions of the period and its connection to many crucial developments in post-war British society, historians have often neglected vital aspects of trade unionism, particularly in its more local manifestations. Both labour histories and more general works have tended to focus on trade unions as institutions, often neglecting activism within the workplace.

This thesis will take as its subject the experiences of one section of the “organised working class” - car workers - who, perhaps more than any other group, found themselves at the centre of these narratives. Accounting for 512,400 employees at the industry's peak, the British motor industry experienced substantial change between 1945 and 1977.<sup>10</sup> After a period of prosperity following the war, Britain's car firms fell one-by-one into difficulties over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Their financial troubles were coterminous with expanding workplace activism, as membership levels rose from 1945 onwards, culminating in virtually 100 per cent density by 1966.<sup>11</sup> Car workers subsequently became one of the most strike-prone groups in Britain,

---

10 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 325.

11 H.A. Turner, Garfield Clack and Geoffrey Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry: A Study of Industrial Unrest and an International Comparison* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 194.



with industrial conflict increasing thereafter.<sup>12</sup> Although the relationship between shop-floor activism and economic instability was never straightforward, contemporary commentators regularly presented the former as the cause of the latter.

Such developments had a special resonance in public discourse. As the quintessential industry of modernity, vehicle manufacture was often a metric by which industrialised nations measured their progress, and the economic difficulties experienced by British firms regularly gave commentators cause to doubt the health of the nation more generally.<sup>13</sup> With most other strike-prone groups – miners, dockers, shipbuilders – concentrated in industries that had been contracting since before World War Two,<sup>14</sup> it was car workers who featured most often in decline narratives and who faced comparisons with their more efficient counterparts overseas.<sup>15</sup> With high wages and substantial deskilling prevailing in the industry, car workers also figured heavily in the narratives surrounding affluence, declining occupational solidarities and socio-political change.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, car workers' experiences of industrial activism potentially offer us unique insights into the nature of labour militancy in the era of declinism.

Using sources specifically relating to shop-floor activism – including the correspondence, agitational propaganda, notes and meeting minutes of shop stewards, as well as life history interviews – this thesis will consider the role of car workers in re-shaping mid-twentieth-century British workplaces. Exploring

---

12 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 315.

13 Jim Tomlinson, 'The Government and the Car Industry, 1945-70', *Journal of Transport History*, 20 (1999), 17–29; Roy Church, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. ix–x.

14 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 93–95.

15 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate : Britain's Unions in the Seventies* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 156–161; Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 294–325.

16 John Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968); John Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

the nature and origins of the power they were understood to wield, I will investigate the ways in which 1950s factory activists were able to change social relations on the shop floor and generate new cultures and behaviours. In so doing I will call into question many assumptions prevalent in the literature about the post-war settlement and the origins of workplace activism in this period. I will then look at the operation of these workplace cultures in the 1960s and 1970s in order to challenge much of the conventional framework that currently structures discussion of the role of trade unions in this period, by reconsidering the nature of the “social power” that car workers held as a group and as individuals. Finally, this thesis will consider the ways in which the collective cultures generated by workplace activism re-made social, cultural and political values amongst car workers.

Through looking at these themes and sources this thesis will look to focus on the agency and subjectivity of car workers in this period. As Arthur McIvor notes, post-war Britain experienced quite profound changes in the nature of work, as well as in the social and political institutions that structured life in the workplace.<sup>17</sup> As I argue below these changes have most often been discussed in terms of governance, industrial relations institutions and wider economic processes. However, the role of workers themselves in these transformations and the development of economic life in Britain has been treated with less care. Car workers (amongst others) have often been treated by historians as simply a problem for governments to solve rather than as actors in their own right.

Yet comprehending the ways in which they set about trying to re-shape their working lives offers an important insight into the power of “the organised working class” in post-war British democracy. The collective and individual behaviours of car workers had a profound effect on Britain's development and

---

<sup>17</sup> Arthur McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 227; Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives : Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

by looking at the records of workplace groups, this thesis aims to improve understanding of how the social practices they developed enabled and constrained their agency, structuring their ability to cooperatively shape their environment: their collective “social power”.<sup>18</sup> This in turn will help us to reconsider the connections between labour militancy and worker subjectivity in this period, allowing me to place the conscious experiences, perspectives and beliefs of participants in workplace activism in their proper historical context. Engagement with new sources will enable me to disaggregate some of the many thousands of workers in the motor industry and develop a more nuanced idea of what drove their participation in collective action, and critique some of the more straightforward accounts of the motivations behind worker mobilisation. Through looking at these individual and collective experiences, we can more fully understand both why and how car workers influenced British life in the ways that they did.

## **Trade union militancy in post-war historiography**

Unsurprisingly, given the declining status of labour studies over the past thirty years, recent works directly pertaining to workplace activism in the post-war motor industry are rare. Sheila Cohen's 2013 book *Notoriously Militant* explores the politics of one of the main Transport and General Workers Union [TGWU]<sup>19</sup> branches at Ford's Dagenham plant, offering a detailed narrative on the union struggles there between 1931 and 2002.<sup>20</sup> Cohen focuses particularly on the development of new politics regarding race and gender in the 1980s, as well as providing details of conflicts over job and wage security during the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, research by Alison Gilmour has shed light on the motivations that

---

18 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: Vol. 1 A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 6.

19 See glossary for a list of abbreviations.

20 Sheila Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch* (London: Merlin, 2013).

21 Cohen, *Notoriously Militant*, pp. 109–119, 136–154.

drove industrial disorder at Chrysler's Linwood factory between 1963 and 1981.<sup>22</sup> Gilmour concluded that unrest often consisted of 'a spontaneous reaction to work allocation, supervision and working conditions', with tension arising whenever management attempted to undermine skill and autonomy.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from Gilmour and Cohen, one has to return to 1994 to find the last academic history of motor industry workplace activism; Ralph Darlington's study of Ford Halewood. This work charted the ways in which workers provoked and reacted to changes in the firm's industrial relations policies.<sup>24</sup> Darlington focuses primarily on the divergent politics that characterised the three plants – transmission, assembly and body manufacturing – on the Halewood site. *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism* was one of the final contributions to a debate within the academic discipline of industrial relations which focused primarily on “the frontier of job control”.<sup>25</sup> During the 1980s Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin wrote extensively about the motor industry on this theme, looking principally at the ways in which the strategies of managements and unions affected control over production.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the motor industry, general works on post-war trade unionism are more plentiful. Within the last decade, Alastair Reid's book *United We Stand* is possibly the most thorough, charting the history of British trade unionism from

---

22 Alison Julia Gilmour, 'Examining the “Hard-Boiled Bunch”: Work Culture and Industrial Relations at the Linwood Car Plant, C. 1963-1981' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Glasgow University, 2009).

23 Gilmour, 'The Hard-Boiled Bunch', p. 266.

24 Ralph Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: Shop Stewards' Organization in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell, 1994).

25 Carter Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1975).

26 *The Power to Manage?: Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative Historical Perspective*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (London: Routledge, 1991); *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *The Automobile Industry and Its Workers: Between Fordism and Flexibility*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

its origins in medieval guilds.<sup>27</sup> Reid places himself in the “liberal voluntarist” tradition of an earlier generation of labour historians and industrial relations scholars – H.A. Clegg, Keith Laybourn and Henry Pelling - each of whom also produced general histories of British trade unionism.<sup>28</sup> Broadly, this school has argued that organised labour in Britain can be characterised primarily as an effort to defend free collective bargaining.<sup>29</sup> Chris Howell's *Trade Unions and the State* takes a more specific view, focusing on the considerable influence of the British state over industrial relations.<sup>30</sup> Chris Wrigley has also written extensively on post-war trade unionism, defending trade unions against many of the charges levelled against them by declinists and rejecting the idea that they disproportionately harmed 'British competitiveness'.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst these works produce fairly straightforward narrative accounts of trade unions as institutions, the two volumes edited by Campbell, Fishman and McIlroy – *The Post-War Compromise* and *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism* - offer more critical insights into the relationship between workplace activism and a variety of topics, including anti-Communism, the Labour Party, productivity, and rank-and-file groups.<sup>32</sup> The second volume contains interesting contributions from Mike Savage on the sociology of male manual work cultures, Chris Wrigley on the role of women and Ken Lunn on trade unions and immigration. John McIlroy's two essays on far left factory activism and Foster and Woolfson's contribution on shop-floor pedagogy in the Upper Clyde

---

27 Alastair Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London: Penguin, 2005).

28 Keith Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1800-1990* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992); Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976); H.A. Clegg, *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970).

29 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. x–xi.

30 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 1–19.

31 Chris Wrigley, *British Trade Unions since 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 82.

32 *The Post-War Compromise: British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1, 1945-64*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007).

Shipbuilders Work-In contain vital insights into the nature of being a “militant” in the early 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Dave Lyddon's essay in the same volume also convincingly argues for placing the activism of “rank-and-file” workers at the heart of explanations for union strength during the “glorious summer” of 1972, a theme Ralph Darlington and he expand upon in their own co-written monograph.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond labour history, the role of workplace activism has had an ambiguous presence in more general histories. Two recent works on post-war Britain by Paul Addison and Brian Harrison both comment extensively on the subject, as do older general histories by Arthur Marwick and Kenneth Morgan.<sup>35</sup> Such works usually reference industrial conflict primarily as pathology - either as a problem for politicians to solve, or as reflective of underlying economic issues. Elsewhere, social and cultural histories of class like Selina Todd's *The People* and Mike Savage's *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940* offer more acute insights into the nature of social conflict during the late 1960s and 1970s, drawing our attention to connections between the changing nature of both work and social identity.<sup>36</sup>

### *Themes and narratives*

There are a number of underlying themes that connect much of this literature, many of them structured by the popular conceptions surrounding the role trade

---

33 *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007).

34 Ralph Darlington and Dave Lyddon, *Glorious Summer : Class Struggle in Britain, 1972* (London: Bookmarks, 2001).

35 Paul Addison, *No Turning Back : The Peaceful Revolutions of Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?: The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2003); Kenneth Morgan, *Britain since 1945 : The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

36 Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2014); Michael Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940 : The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

unions played in this period. Unsurprisingly, these tendencies are most evident in general histories, the breadth of which often precludes serious critique of established ideas. In *Finding a Role* Brian Harrison describes life in Britain between 1951 and 1970 as being structured around a broad political consensus over a form of corporatism marked by 'the continuous interaction between governments, employers organisations and trade unions'.<sup>37</sup> The latter were accepted as a 'true estate of the realm' after the war and would spend the years to come engaged in a utilitarian effort to maximise income'.<sup>38</sup> Eventually the main expression of these attitudes – the defence of free collective bargaining – came to undermine corporatist income policies, damaging the British economy.<sup>39</sup> *Seeking a Role* continues in this vein, outlining how in the 1970s 'strikes mobilised the organized and the organizable against the rest', drawing on an 'anti-social weapon' to hurt the public and extort wage increases.<sup>40</sup> Harrison then charts how this behaviour continued throughout the decade, culminating in the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79 finally discrediting trade union militancy and corporatism more generally.<sup>41</sup>

Drawing on stereotypical industrial relations villains – short-sighted “union barons”, inexplicably disruptive “militants”, the “apathetic” mass of workers – Harrison's account is often ill-informed and broadly accepting of conventional narratives.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, it would be difficult to argue that other accounts have subjected the categories Harrison employs to much more scrutiny. Some, like

---

37 Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role*, p. xvii.

38 Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role*, p. 210.

39 Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role*, pp. 454–460.

40 Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, p. 152.

41 Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, pp. 155–158.

42 Both volumes contain various spurious assertions of which the most glaring is one statement regarding the Pentonville Five (dockers imprisoned for contempt of court following the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act). Harrison claims they were released from prison 'much to their disgust', a disgust that is pure invention on Harrison's part and rather difficult to discern on the jubilant face of Vic Turner upon his release. See: Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, p. 154.

David Childs and John Turner, are similarly scathing of trade union influence.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Kenneth Morgan engages in the same discussions, attributing blame in different places.<sup>44</sup> Paul Addison's *No Turning Back* draws on the same basic conception of the post-war settlement, with full employment and trade union recognition generating fairly automatic material improvements for manual workers.<sup>45</sup> For Addison, 'the high status and esteem enjoyed by the trade unions was a distinguishing feature of the 1940s and 1950s', spoiled only by tensions between leaders and the "rank and file".<sup>46</sup> As the post-war period progressed, Britain's attempts to establish a 'flourishing social democracy on the West German or Swedish model' were thwarted during the 1960s and early 1970s because 'the trade unions were unwilling or unable to participate'.<sup>47</sup> Addison, like Harrison, argues that union militancy damaged the economy by interrupting production and impeding changes in working practices.<sup>48</sup>

Both authors read the demise of militant trade unionism backwards from Thatcherism, differing in that whilst Harrison is building a charge sheet, Addison laments the inability of the trade unions to save themselves prior to the backlash.<sup>49</sup> *No Turning Back* also offers an alternative explanation for the changing patterns of industrial conflict. In place of Harrison's virtual silence on why strike levels increased, Addison explains militancy primarily as a function of inflation, union fragmentation and raised expectations: 'The trade union "movement" consisted in fact of thousands of separate and largely independent bargaining units which were in effect competing with one another in a pay

---

43 John Turner, 'Governors, Governance and Governed: British Politics since 1945', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 19–61 (pp. 30–35); David Childs, *Britain since 1939: Progress and Decline* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 159–172; Dennis Kavanagh and Peter Morris, *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Thatcher* (Worcester: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 29.

44 Morgan, pp. 251–253, 302, 322, 555–556.

45 Addison, *No Turning Back*, p. 61.

46 Addison, *No Turning Back*, pp. 62–63.

47 Addison, *No Turning Back*, pp. 134–135.

48 Addison, *No Turning Back*, pp. 192–195.

49 Addison, *No Turning Back*, p. 335.



scramble fuelled by inflation.<sup>50</sup> Addison therefore also treats labour militancy as pathological, but finds the roots of this dysfunction primarily in inadequate institutions and comparatively straightforward economic rationalities, where collective mobilisation was simply a case of workers demanding higher wages to compensate for a rising cost of living.

In this regard *No Turning Back* finds an echo in the explanations put forward by many labour historians for changing patterns of workplace conflict in post-war Britain, particularly those of the “liberal voluntarist” school discussed above. In the context of a historiography which concerns itself with trade unionism mainly for the purposes of diagnosing the pathologies of Keynesian corporatism, scholars like Reid, Pelling, Laybourn and Wrigley have looked to reinsert organised labour back into the historical mainstream. This has led them to generate counter arguments to the two main criticisms posed by conventional narratives: that trade unions were over-powerful and as a result damaged the economy, and that much labour militancy derived from unreasonable demands or political motivations.

Reid's book *United We Stand* implicitly responds to these narratives by arguing for a history in which workers form an 'integral part of society'.<sup>51</sup> Contrary to accusations of political radicalism, Reid broadly sees all British trade unionism as characterised by a 'progressive liberalism' sustained throughout the movement's existence, with militancy explicable as an understandable response to economic circumstances, and generally an effect of variable employment levels.<sup>52</sup> Events between 1945 and 1977 are incorporated into a narrative which begins in the 1920s, and increasing post-war activism is generally understood as an effect of workers making 'ordinary economic

---

50 Addison, *No Turning Back*, pp. 188–194.

51 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. ix.

52 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. x–xvii.

demands in new ways'.<sup>53</sup> This idea that British trade unions were mainly concerned with “economism”, the pursuit of better wages to the exclusion of almost anything else, is emphasised particularly in the section on “process workers”, in which the 'blunt economic pragmatism' of Joe Gormley, President of the National Union of Mineworkers from 1971 to 1982, is discussed in detail.<sup>54</sup> Such ideas are also a feature of other accounts of this period, with factors like inflation, full employment and high tax levels used as explanations for changing patterns in industrial relations.<sup>55</sup>

Conflict in these narratives is generally assumed to be a reaction to external developments, with changes to the cost of living or job security deployed as automatic causes of collective mobilisation, rather than merely favourable contexts. The most detailed (and convincing) version of this thesis is that espoused by Chris Howell. Howell argues that in the opening decades of the twentieth century Britain moved to incorporate “externalised” collective bargaining into industrial life. Management retained control over production but wages were to be established externally through national negotiations.<sup>56</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, principally as a result of the industrial shift to “Fordism”, this system came under increasing strain, as 'the absence of institutions for managing economic change' produced shop-floor conflict. In response, workplace bargaining, the system advocated by the Donovan Commission,<sup>57</sup>

---

53 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. xiv.

54 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 304–308.

55 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 164–175; Wrigley, *British Trade Unions since 1933*, pp. 20–51; Robert Taylor, 'The Trade Union “Problem” in the Age of Consensus, 1960-79', in *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 173–99 (p. 185); Ken Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation, 1945-1960', in *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 156–72 (p. 160); Patrick Maguire, 'Labour and the Law: The Politics of British Industrial Relations, 1945-79', in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979: Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 44–61 (p. 46).

56 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 15–17.

57 The 1965-68 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Organisations. The details of this report will be discussed at length later in this thesis.

was introduced over the following two decades, before eventually being superseded by individualised “Thatcherite” industrial relations.<sup>58</sup>

### *Political motivations*

Supplementary to this exploration of the material motivations behind militancy is one key assertion regarding the politics of labour militancy. Reid's section on motor industry activism concludes with a discussion of worker attitudes in which the emphasis is largely on dismissing accusations of political extremism. Subsequently we learn of the conditional nature of the influence of the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB], which was 'based mainly on their reputations as effective bargaining representatives', and of the 'extremely patchy and fragile presence' of Trotskyist groups.<sup>59</sup> The implied conclusion of this section is that since car workers were in their great majority not adherents to Marxist-Leninism then their activism could best be understood as part of the kind of “economism” discussed above. Reid's description of the miners' attitudes toward trade unionism as being 'about industrial issues, above all the size of the weekly wage packet' could equally be assumed to apply to car workers.<sup>60</sup>

Part of the function of this discussion is to respond implicitly to the narrative prominent at the time in which industrial unrest was attributed to “politically-motivated militants”. In place of this Reid offers a vision of British workers at mid-century with conventional views about the world responding to “genuine” grievances and “industrial issues”.<sup>61</sup> Other “voluntarist” historians engage in similar exercises in absolving trade unionists of “political motivation”, each stressing the extent to which support for Leninist groups was in essence

---

58 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 16, 121, 133.

59 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 297–298.

60 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 308.

61 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 298–299, 329.

“unreal” and based on a calculation of material interests. For instance, Robert Taylor outlines how the CPGB lacked any ability to go beyond the most basic of economic demands and talks at length about the Socialist Labour League's [SLL<sup>62</sup>] manipulation of workplace politics at British Leyland's Cowley assembly plant, emphasising the limited influence of their ideology. Elsewhere, Pelling describes how low attendances at branch meetings enabled Communists to continue wielding influence, whilst still losing deposits in national elections.<sup>63</sup> In these sorts of accounts such analysis is often accompanied by reaffirmations of the essentially mundane (and mostly economic) basis of all labour militancy. For instance, Laybourn looks to legitimise industrial action by referring to grievances as “genuine” or informing us that particular actions were “understandable and unsurprising” given the issue at hand.<sup>64</sup> Concepts like “economic rationality”, “industrial issues” and “genuine”, “reasonable”, “understandable” grievances are regularly mobilised as the counter-point to questions of politicisation.

Similar defensiveness can also be found in discussions of “trade union power”. At the time, trade unions were widely understood to be “overmighty”, particularly in the motor industry. As I have noted above, for many historians this authority originated in the post-war settlement and was wielded in an uncomplicated manner by “trade unions” as institutions. Opposition to this idea has generally come from the objection that such estimations were grossly exaggerated. Taylor, for instance, notes that ‘the national myth of obstructive and tyrannical trade unionism’ was derived more from polemic than evidence, and that rather than too much strength, the union movement suffered from a lack of resources and an excessively narrow focus.<sup>65</sup> In this regard the power of

---

62 The SLL was a Trotskyist organisation formed in 1959, eventually changing its name to the Workers Revolutionary Party [WRP] in 1973.

63 Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 80–86; Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, pp. 138–143.

64 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 164, 172, 175.

65 Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics : Government and Unions since*

trade unions compares unfavourably with the formal institutional role played by their Swedish and German counterparts.<sup>66</sup> Just as Reid seems to be implicitly arguing against a conventional narrative where militancy had illegitimate motivations, Taylor counters another aspect of trade union pathology: the myth of the tyrannical trade unions.

## **Agency and subjectivity**

In all of these works there is an underlying tendency to engage with and negate a conventional anti-union narrative that dates back to the period itself. Within its own terms this scholarship has generated a number of important observations. Howell's assertion that the state was central to industrial relations is well-observed, Reid is right to dismiss the idea that labour militancy was primarily brought about by "Communist troublemakers" and Taylor is correct to point out the limitations of formal trade union power. However, there is a sense that in orientating research around these narratives, we fail to approach this subject in more interesting ways.

For instance, the question of "trade union power" as posed by Taylor robs workers of much of their capacity to influence and shape events. By comparing confederations in Britain, Sweden and Germany, the power being discussed becomes that held by unions as institutions. Yet power within social organisations does not operate in simple ways. Organisations that fulfil particular roles within corporate societies may wield considerable power within bargaining processes, but decision-making and influence might be restricted to leaders and relatively inaccessible to the wider membership.<sup>67</sup> The extent to which workers themselves exercise social power – shaping their own

---

1945 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 2.

66 Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question*, pp. 339–340.

67 Ralph Darlington and Martin Upchurch, 'A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File versus Bureaucracy Debate', *Capital & Class*, 36 (2012), 77–95.

environment - is not necessarily determined by which committees their leaders are invited to sit on. Furthermore, workers who are members of social organisations with comparatively weak institutional roles may still exercise considerable influence through their *collective* social power, by using direct action to transform conditions in their everyday lives.<sup>68</sup> Potentially this last form of power gives workers themselves more direct influence over workplace life and wider society than their institutional roles within corporate bargaining structures.<sup>69</sup>

In much of the historiography, a lack of interest in the complexities of agency in workplace life is reinforced by other elements of the narratives and counter-narratives around Britain's post-war industrial relations. Explanations that highlight economics and state institutions as the main determinants of labour militancy leave little space for workers themselves to play much of a role. The pattern for conventional narratives about this period is one where unions as institutions reacted to economic and social change. Even when the complexity of these reactions is acknowledged, as it is implicitly when Addison discusses the problematic "fragmentation" of trade unions, workers themselves are still seldom granted full subjectivity - the capacity to develop their own identities and beliefs, their own understandings and interests, and their own role in deciding and acting in those interests. Instead they are described using the language of the unceasing movement of nature. Trade union histories are thus filled with 'upsurges', workers 'swept along' or leaders unable 'to channel the rising tide'.<sup>70</sup> The masses appear as an army to be well-led or, on occasion, unfortunately

---

68 Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, NY: Vintage books, 1979), pp. x–xii, 29–37.

69 For instance, in their comparison of French and German trade unionism, Marc Maurice *et al* noted that where German workers often had more formal rights than their French counterparts, they were subjected to tighter control by their trade union officials. See: Marc Maurice, François Sellier and Jean-Jacques Silvestre, *The Social Foundations of Industrial power: A Comparison of France and Germany* (London: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 138–145.

70 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 356–357.

impossible to 'rein in'.<sup>71</sup> The trade union militant as an individual is lost, as is the actual experience of creating and sustaining industrial organisation and protest. In this formulation, numbers of trade unionists and strikes surge and swell, fall and decline, as if they were moved by a gravitational force, their members' agency entirely lost.

Moreover, the prioritisation of the state and the economy in explanations for industrial conflict simultaneously silences subjectivities, with labour historians seldom dedicating much attention to the cultural values of mid-twentieth-century car workers. Paying only superficial attention to the social processes that actually mobilised workers, many works of the voluntarist school outline only two essential facts about workers' attitudes: firstly, that they were not generally sympathetic to Leninism and secondly, that their activism was usually driven by "instrumental" motivations; that is economic self-interest. The effect of this analysis is to attribute to workers a sort of "negative subjectivity" in which we learn about what workers did not believe in, rather than what they did. Furthermore, what few details we do find on the nature of workers' ideas tend to reduce militancy to "economic motivations" and "industrial issues", with little attempt to analyse the precise *historical* meaning of those phrases for car workers, or how these factors were used to mobilise people. Both the nature of "economic motivations" and the capacity to act in pursuit of them are largely taken for granted.

### *Complications*

Within these works, the treatment of trade unions as unitary power structures seems superficial, and when we look at more detailed sociological studies from the period we often find that the distribution of power within British workplaces

---

71 Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, pp. 415–420.

was more complex and dynamic. Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford* provides us with one detailed investigation of how workers constructed collective social power. Beynon describes how over the course of the 1960s, worker activists at Ford Halewood created strong shop-floor organisations on the basis of “sectional” departmental meetings and shop steward representation. Over time stewards, through successfully prosecuting and resolving disputes within their workshops, carved out a role as a semi-stable part of factory life.<sup>72</sup> As their organisation developed, the workers were able to find spaces in which to discuss issues together and to engage in collective action to improve conditions, eventually developing a capacity for mass strikes which saw them set the tone for wider trade unionism in the company, often dragging reluctant union leaders into conflict.<sup>73</sup>

Although Ford's rulebook granted little formal power to the stewards or the members they led, they developed a great deal of agency in shaping their lives at work and beyond. That social power stemmed not from the formal rights inscribed in the post-war settlement *per se* but actually from the contingent role that collective action had carved out for them. For shop-floor representatives, power was distinct in form to that wielded by unions, being based almost entirely on their role in workplace culture. Their power existed because stewards were entrusted over time with the task of representation, the result of an agreement amongst workmates that such an arrangement enabled them to articulate grievances in the face of an employer too powerful for them to confront individually.<sup>74</sup> This power was delegated from below, a position created by the consensus of a multitude of subjects acting in concert. This act of creation afforded the shop steward certain powers to act over their members, through allocating speaking and organisational rights (chairing and calling meetings), and resources (money, a paper, leaflets), but with a tenuousness

---

<sup>72</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 243–288.

<sup>74</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 123.



and instability which meant this “ringleader” role could only continue so long as 'the steward act[ed] and live[d] through his members'.<sup>75</sup>

The operation of power in mid-twentieth century workplaces was thus neither as simple, nor as static, as it often appears in studies of trade unionism. Not only did power work in multiple directions and invest itself in multiple actors, it also changed quite dramatically over short periods of time and in ways not intended by those in formal authority – be they politicians, union leaders or employers. Regardless of economic conditions and political reforms, the unprecedented level of activism the motor industry saw between 1945 and 1977 was not inevitable, reflecting Robert Kuttner's wider assertion about the contingent nature of the connections between post-war industrial capitalism and mass unionisation.<sup>76</sup> Once we stop taking such developments for granted (by seeing them as automatic responses to economic change) and start to understand the ability to undertake collective action as something that had to be 'painstakingly constructed'<sup>77</sup> on a social and cultural level, its emergence becomes a key historical problem in its own right. Mobilisation reflected a capacity to generate new patterns of behaviour, enabling workers to change the operation of power in their everyday lives. Thus the more interesting question with regard to post-war labour militancy is less the extent of *union* power, than the origin and forms of the social power wielded by *workers themselves*.

The importance of such dynamics has been highlighted by Beverley Silver, who argues in her work *Forces of Labor* that industrial conflict and worker activism are central to the development of capitalism. Tracing the development of the automobile and textile industries, Silver shows how labour militancy provokes capital to employ various 'fixes' aimed at restoring what Marx refers to as the

---

<sup>75</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 187.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Kuttner, *Everything for Sale: The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 80.

<sup>77</sup> McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide', p. 115.

“real subjection” of labour.<sup>78</sup> These fixes guide the development of capitalism by prompting the use of new technology (to bypass worker disruption through deskilling or mechanization), moves to new geographic areas (as companies shift production away from militancy) and eventually the investment of profits in less conflictual industries.<sup>79</sup> In this way, workers force capitalism to develop new productive forces. Silver's assertion thus holds forth the possibility that the unpredictable ways in which workers tried to impose their collective will on employers might well be central to change in post-war Britain more generally.

Given its importance in this regard, the extent to which power in trade unions and workplaces was dispersed, unstable, and worked in multiple directions, has been subject to comparatively meagre analysis in much of the historiography. The tendency has been to simply assume the existence of collective bargaining power as unitary and inherent to trade unionism, rather than to explore how different forms of power operated, where they came from or what their effects were. Consequently, historians have tended to understand features of British industrial relations like “fragmentation” as a failing of the wider system of governance, rather than as part of an active preference for decentralised “sectional” organising, and thus little attempt has been made to understand its origins or how it enabled and constrained the agency of car workers.

Only by theorising different forms of power can we better understand these processes, and therefore the meaning of important features of workplace life like “sectional” bargaining. For instance, in the example of the Halewood stewards we can broadly identify three distinct elements that structure their agency. Firstly there is the stewards' institutional role, which provides access to a small degree of formal authority – the speaking and organisational rights

---

78 David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 107; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 645.

79 Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1–40.

described above. Secondly, there is a disciplinary role, in which the stewards negotiate with management to establish the terms under which work takes place and inadvertently reproduce consent for the production regime as a whole.<sup>80</sup> Finally, there is a form of collective social power that is conjured into existence when workgroups cooperate, communicate and act together, which enables them to impose themselves on management, and that exists only as a product of their social practices and shared assumptions.<sup>81</sup>

Historians discussing “trade union power” have focused most heavily on the nature of the first two forms, looking to establish how it was that trade unions as institutions were able to exercise control in British society. Yet, as Angus Stewart notes in his *Theories of Power and Domination*, studying power in this way (as “power over” or domination) often makes it difficult to understand processes of change. Both formal power structures (like managerial roles or trade union positions) and totalising disciplinary regimes (like modes of production) tend to be fairly static.<sup>82</sup> Hence whilst histories of trade unionism have been able to identify phenomena like “union fragmentation” by describing industrial relations institutions, they have struggled to explain where these social relations come from or why they change in the ways that they do.

Stewart contrasts these theories of “power over” with what he refers to as theories of “power to”, which he identifies with the work of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt. Drawing on Habermas' theory of “communicative action”, Stewart argues that social communities can be 'realisable through speech and action, which is to say, through the power (to) that is the concerted action of intersubjectivity'.<sup>83</sup> A group of subjects like the workers at Halewood arrive at

---

80 Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1990).

81 Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, pp. 6–11.

82 Angus Stewart, *Theories of Power and Domination : The Politics of Empowerment in Late Modernity* (London: SAGE, 2001), p. 35.

83 Stewart, *Theories of Power and Domination*, p. 43.

mutual understanding through speech acts, establishing shared norms and interpretations of the objective, the social and the subjective - producing consensus. A lack of attention to the dynamism of this final form of social power, created “from below”, explains in part the static version of power that is the norm in much trade union history. Through thinking more about the distinctive nature of this “communicative action” and the social power it creates, we can better understand the changing nature of *workers'* agency in post-war British workplaces, beyond the formal institutional role of trade unions.

### *Rationalities*

By separating out the formal institutional role occupied by trade unions as disciplinary structures and looking at the more contingent forms of power created through “communicative action”, we can acquire a greater sense of the evolving forms of workers' power in this period and how they shaped perspectives and collective action. We can also begin to challenge assertions about the cultural and social lives of workers in this period and step outside the conventional paradigms of post-war labour history. For instance, if we view “economic self-interest” (the cultural category *par excellence* of this period's trade union histories) through a lens where social power is seen as dynamic rather than stationary, it begins to look more complex. Richard Hyman observes that ‘for discontent to be expressed in a strike, a minimum of worker solidarity and, organization is presupposed almost by definition’.<sup>84</sup> As both these minima clearly contain considerable cultural and social content outside of economic calculation, we are immediately confronted with very basic questions about why workers might identify particular groups and individuals as forming a community of interests.

---

84 Richard Hyman, *Strikes* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 57.

Indeed, this is made clear even in studies of those groups considered the archetype for “economistic” trade unionism. Vauxhall employees interviewed for *The Affluent Worker* were identified as having an orientation towards a form of “instrumental collectivism” in which little moral importance was invested in either work or trade unionism.<sup>85</sup> Yet, as Savage points out, their attitudes revealed a very specific type of calculation of economic self-interest, as distinct from the ideas of middle-class professionals as it was from the supposed values of “traditional” trade unionism.<sup>86</sup> Even at their most calculative, car workers made cultural choices about what their economic self-interest was, who was included in it and how it should be defended. They made choices giving precedence to individual prizes like promotions or favours from supervisors, or collective ones like wage rises, whilst also balancing their pay packets against the job security provided by a healthy firm.

Furthermore, it seems to be the case that large numbers of strikes ostensibly over pay actually incorporated other grievances, precisely because money was the most legitimate topic over which workers could protest.<sup>87</sup> Even when strikes were solely motivated by pay, Hyman argues that the calculations involved in determining whether collective action could be financially justified were so complex and contradictory that straight economistic judgements were often impossible.<sup>88</sup> Balancing lost wages and disruption to production against future increases and industrial leverage, out of necessity collective decisions often drew on notions of fairness and justice rather than pragmatic calculation. At no point were “economic interests” straightforward or simply apparent.

---

85 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 111–114.

86 Michael Savage, ‘Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures’, in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 23–42.

87 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 127–129.

88 Hyman, *Strikes* pp. 113–116.

Such complications are understandable. As Maurice Godelier notes 'there is no economic rationality "in itself", nor any "definitive" form of economic rationality'.<sup>89</sup> "Economism" is always historical and governed by one's place in the particular economic and political structure of a society.<sup>90</sup> When we employ 'an *a priori* idea, a speculative definition of what is rational, then the entire answer found can only be ideological', that is, reflective of only one ideal of economic rationality.<sup>91</sup> Godelier looked to unpick the ways in which ostensibly universal rationalities actually functioned according to a society's prevailing values (ideology), as opposed to any universal notion of the economic. This lack of universality contains an insight which potentially sheds light on both the aversion to certain types of economic rationality displayed by Goldthorpe's Vauxhall workers and the varying types of activism to be found in British workplaces. Attitudes towards economic interests were by no means subject to a simple, universal rationality and were shaped by the culture of the shop floor.

### *Non-Communism and political apathy*

Like "economism", the negative subjectivities of non-Communism and political apathy also generate more questions than answers, despite their basic empirical validity. For instance, although their party members were always a tiny minority, the workplace was a sphere in which far left groups obtained and sustained far more influence than in other parts of British life.<sup>92</sup> From 1951 onwards, the Communist Party held not one seat in parliament, but party

---

89 Maurice Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 292.

90 Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality*, p. 99.

91 Godelier, *Rationality and Irrationality*, p. 6.

92 John McIlroy, "Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned": The Trotskyists and the Trade Unions', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 259–96; John McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 216–58.

members occupied the convenor position at Britain's two largest car factories (Ford Dagenham and Austin Longbridge) for most of the period between 1945 and 1977.<sup>93</sup> Although an instrumental preference for strong bargainers was certainly an important aspect of relationships between Communist activists and members, it was not the only element that defined such interactions. Foster and Woolfson's work on the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in shows one very detailed example of how Communists could shape discussions, with CPGB members at the yards key to determining the workers' responses to proposed redundancies.<sup>94</sup> Accounts implying that support for fringe groups was "inauthentic" prevent us from considering the precise nature of the far left's role, as well as workers' attitudes towards their ideas.

In the case of workers' wider attitudes towards politics, the small number of studies of motor industry life reveal complications both in the changing meaning of the word "political" and the relationship between workplace activism and radical political parties of the left. For instance, many of the workers interviewed in *Working for Ford* were insistent that they were not "political", but in very particular ways. Eddie Roberts, convenor of the Halewood assembly plant in the late 1960s, expressed his own lack of use for politics in a discussion with left-wing activists: 'I don't give a shit what they call me. It doesn't matter to me if they call me "a Communist" or "a Trotskyist" or whatever. It's just that it gets in the way of the job. Y'know, the lads get enough propaganda as it is without having it thrown at them that their convenor is a Communist getting orders from Moscow.'<sup>95</sup> Clearly Roberts' "apolitical" stance was more than a simple absence of politics; it was a collection of affirmations, attitudes and values about what trade unionism was for. The views of the Halewood stewards were historical

---

93 McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics', pp. 239–241.

94 John Foster and Charles Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle : The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Work-In, 1971-72', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (London: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 305–310.

95 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 227.

creations, a product of their experiences and their knowledge of workplace trade unionism elsewhere. For activists, as Roberts' affirmation implies, they were often also ways of thinking that were manifestly distinct from those of less active members.

It was not only amongst activists that such “apolitical” views were expressed. Regarding the 1964-70 Labour government another Halewood steward remarked: 'We've talked about it quite a bit. Most of the lads think you can forget about the Labour Party, y'know. Forget about it because it's never going to do anything for the working class. The general feeling on the floor is that we're on our own. Y'know, we've got to fight our own battles.'<sup>96</sup> Such feelings certainly could broadly be classified as “apathy”, yet clearly also entailed a complex definition of the “political”, in which the boundaries between what was “industrial” (and thus relevant to them) and what was “politics” could shift. This is in many ways unsurprising because such conversations were being repeated elsewhere throughout this period. Lawrence Black has argued that cynicism, apathy and even hate towards “politics” *tout court* was a substantial part of British “political culture” in this period and that 'the definition of what was “political” was itself loaded and contested' in many areas of British life.<sup>97</sup>

Given that, as H.A. Clegg notes, even during the “high tide” of labour militancy 'striking was an exceptional habit' and one which met with increasing disapproval in mainstream public discourse,<sup>98</sup> consideration of car workers' historically-specific perception of the “political”, “industrial” and “economic” has been neglected. Explaining the ideas behind post-war workplace culture in the motor industry is more complex than simply attributing conventional views based on the lowest-common denominators of non-Communism and economic

---

<sup>96</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 225.

<sup>97</sup> Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics : Culture, Consumerism, and Participation, 1954-70* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1–11, 206–212.

<sup>98</sup> Clegg, *The System of Industrial Relations*, p. 328.



self-interest. Unpicking what kind of motivations sustained industrial activism amongst these “exceptional” minorities involves understanding not just the stated reasons for particular actions, but also the micro-cultures which produced them. In this regard Pierre Bourdieu's work on social practices and *habitus* proves instructive. Scholars often draw on Bourdieu's best known book *Distinction* as a way of reflecting on taste and life-style as classed and classifying aspects of modern societies.<sup>99</sup> In this way historians and social scientists offer lucid explanations for how class stratifications perpetuate themselves over time and across generations. However, rather like the theories of domination I have discussed above, this sort of description of society tends to reveal more about why class structures, social practices and cultural norms re-produce themselves rather than why they change.<sup>100</sup>

This study, in looking to explain a shift in the operation of a particular *habitus*, will look to the more neglected *The Logic of Practice*, in which the focus is more on both the uses that individuals make of their *habitus*, and on the possibility those uses offer for change. Bourdieu argues that although an individual's behaviour within their *habitus* is subject to constraints - 'limits set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its [the habitus'] production'<sup>101</sup> - they can still pursue an infinite number of actions, though with a tendency to 'generate all the “reasonable”, “common-sense”, behaviours... which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate.'<sup>102</sup>

---

99 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 468-486.

100 For instance, Mike Savage's work draws heavily on the Bourdieu of *Distinction* but finds it necessary to diverge from its arguments in order to explain the emergence of “new” classless meritocratic 'technical identities' in the second half of the twentieth century. See, Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 243.

101 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 55.

102 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, pp. 55–56.

Bourdieu's description of the *habitus* implicitly allows for the possibility of changes in the rules of its operation. The logical relations of the *habitus* are maintained only when 'continuously practised, kept up and cultivated', existing 'in practice only through and for the official and unofficial uses made of them by agents'. Social practices must be used and kept in working order by individuals who see them as fulfilling potential useful functions, 'satisfying vital material or symbolic interests'.<sup>103</sup> Continuously created, the rules of such cultures are interruptible at any stage, with sudden breaks in practice possible whenever 'subversive action' is able 'to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought which help to orient individual and collective practices'.<sup>104</sup>

Such ideas have obvious applications for understanding labour militancy, particularly in light of the discussion of power above. If we consider particular workplaces as a kind of *habitus*, within which certain behaviours (say striking or electing communists) took on the appearance of "reasonable" or "common sense" activities in a way which they did not elsewhere, we can begin the process of analysing both the development and the operation of those spaces. We can pick out the social practices and cultural norms that made car workers feel that certain forms of collective action were legitimate where other groups did not, whilst also providing an account of the social process whereby workers' "brought to consciousness" and "modified" the practices which had orientated collective behaviour during earlier, less conflictual, phases of industrial relations. Finally, by thinking of the workplace in this way, we can begin to see the general rules for workplace culture within which workers employed their rationality, whilst also disaggregating the attitudes of particular individuals. That is, we can begin to ask not just why workers at Halewood and elsewhere went on strike, but how they came to expect that such collective action was even possible and why it was that they calculated their self-interest in this collective

---

103 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 36.

104 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 141.

way in the first place. We can also move beyond the question of whether car workers' politics were radical or not, towards exploring the framework in which politics and industrial issues were discussed more generally, historicising the variety of opinions to be found within those discussions.

## **A social and cultural history of the shop floor**

In this introduction I have argued that much of the existing historiography of post-war labour militancy is limited in two principal ways. Firstly, despite the importance of notions of “over-powerful” unions in the declinist narratives that emerged in the 1960s, treatment of workers' collective social power in post-war Britain has been very superficial, with little attempt to discern either the origins or nature of the power that workers were said to wield. Secondly, I have argued that although trade union militancy was widely deemed transgressive at the time, historians have tended to reduce the attitudes of trade unionists to the lowest common denominators of “apathy” and “economic self-interest”, neglecting to disaggregate the rich variety of ideas that characterised shop-floor activism or to historicise changing notions of the political and the economic.

Unable or unwilling to escape the dominant paradigms of the period, many historians have employed conceptions of trade union activism that tend to rob participants of their agency and subjectivity. In this regard, the historiography of workplace activism has many problems analogous to the wider field of post-war British history, where the categories of the period are often re-used as if they were descriptions rather than discourses. The accounts described above, where the labour militancy of the 1960s and 1970s involved an uncomplicated instrumental and apolitical trade union reaction to traditional “industrial issues”, draw on another simple organising narrative, in which the rise of the welfare state and post-war “affluence” gradually dissolved “traditional class consciousness” by promoting “home-centred privatism”, “individualism” and a

form of trade unionism lacking in sentiment and solidarity.<sup>105</sup>

In this project I align myself with a number of excellent “revisionist” accounts of post-war social and cultural history, which have critiqued different aspects of this privatism thesis. These include the work of Selina Todd, which has called into question the extent to which economic insecurity disappeared for many working class people during the 1950s.<sup>106</sup> Jon Lawrence's study of inter-war “affluence” has also highlighted how home ownership, consumer lifestyles and privatism all flourished amongst sections of the English working class during the 1930s, again complicating the presumed time line for the emergence of privatism.<sup>107</sup> Recent work by Stephen Brooke and Ben Jones have also both affirmed, as I do in this thesis, the capacity of workers to create new forms of community, solidarity and collectivism in the post-war period. Brooke sees in Roger Mayne's photographs of Southam Street, West London during the 1950s and 1960s, not nostalgia for a white working-class community disrupted by urban regeneration, changing gender relations and migration, but the gradual emergence of new subjectivities and new communities.<sup>108</sup> Ben Jones paints a similar picture in his study of housing in Brighton, arguing that tenants and home owners there also continued to generate new forms of collective social relations even after the advance of slum clearance.<sup>109</sup> By calling into question

---

105 This thesis, originally one of the central claims made in *The Affluent Worker*, continues to feature in histories of this period, including in more recent work by Robert Taylor, in Martin Pugh's history of the Labour Party and in Brian Harrison's work discussed above. See: Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes', in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000*, ed. by Harriet Jones and Paul Addison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 371–88; Martin Pugh, *Speak for Britain! : A New History of the Labour Party* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), pp. 317–360; Harrison, *Seeking a Role*, p. 210; Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, pp. 163-164.

106 Selina Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street : Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 501–18.

107 Jon Lawrence, 'Class, “Affluence” and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, C. 1930–64', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 273–99

108 Stephen Brooke, 'Revisiting Southam Street : Class, Generation, Gender, and Race in the Photography of Roger Mayne', *Journal of British Studies*, 53/2 (2014), 453-496.

109 Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

the connection between “tradition” and “solidarity”, and between “modern” and “individual”, these accounts look to historicise and contextualise many of the changes presumed to have taken place in working-class life in this period. This thesis aims to contribute to this literature, and by so doing help to restore a degree of agency to participants in workplace activism, previously treated by historians as either victims of processes in which they had no say or problems to be solved by the state and employers.

The reluctance to call into question the language of the period has hampered our understanding of the extent of car workers' social power in this period and prevented a more nuanced account of the variable meanings of labour militancy and politics in factory life. This thesis proposes to deal with these absences partially through thinking about power in a multi-faceted way, distinguishing the power constructed via concerted action from both power in a disciplinary regime and from formal authority. This will primarily manifest itself in a focus on the changing forms of shop-floor organising. Through study of the archival material left by shop stewards – diaries, meeting minutes, letters and agitational propaganda – it is possible re-analyse the changing nature of workers' agency at the point of production to better comprehend workers' power, conflict and change in this period of British history. Such sources have a bias towards the experiences of more active trade unionists. However, with considered use and careful attention to their absences, these texts also give us access to vital details concerning the social practices that car workers used to organise collectively and the ways in which this enabled and constrained the agency of all types of participant. In this regard, those that did not speak at meetings will be as important as those that did.

In addition to this close analysis of how car workers organised, this thesis will look at workers' experiences of mobilisation and the way that their access to the social practices of trade unionism set the context for their ideas and

perceptions. Making use of shop-floor sources like letters, workplace bulletins and oral history interviews, this thesis will call into question many of the ideas like “economism”, and “apathy” currently central to existing explanations of labour militancy in this period. Where many historians have used “industrial issues” as a straightforward cause of workplace conflict, I will look to flesh out what post-war car workers meant when they categorised particular problems as “industrial” or “political”. In understanding changing subjectivities acknowledging the various silences in the studied texts will be crucial. For example, workplace bulletins were usually produced as a way of encouraging participation in union activities and thus reflect most directly the convictions of an activist minority. However, they were also deliberately pitched in ways which reflected the authors' intimate knowledge of both their audience and their *habitus*, and therefore inadvertently reveal important cultural norms.

Oral history will be used with due consideration of the conditions under which it was produced and of the ways interviewers and interviewees constructed coherent narratives, prioritising some aspects of their stories and neglecting others.<sup>110</sup> This thesis draws on a corpus of historic oral interviews conducted with car workers mostly during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This material has been used in preference to the 12 oral history interviews I undertook during the project. The decision to exclude one source and include the other was taken after consideration of the nature of their “orality” - their construction as an oral source.<sup>111</sup> Examining my interviews, it became apparent that the subjects' narratives were dominated by their attitudes towards the rise of Thatcherism and its relationship to industrial unrest in the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, their accounts contained relatively little detailed information on shop-floor life before 1979. Such life histories provide us with considerable insight into the ways in which Thatcherism has shaped popular memories of 1970s industrial

---

110 Alessandro Portelli, ‘The Peculiarities of Oral History’, *History Workshop*, 11 (1981), 96–107 (pp. 98–99, 103–104).

111 Portelli, ‘The Peculiarities of Oral History’, pp. 96–98

unrest,<sup>112</sup> particularly the extent to which debates over its legacy have obscured much of the nature of post-war workplace militancy.

However, for the purposes of this study, which aims at a granular reconstruction of shop-floor activism, Len Holden and Paul Worm's collections proved more useful. With the majority of participants still employed in the motor industry when they were interviewed, and the now conventional narrative of 1970s Britain less fixed in public memory, these accounts were able to provide valuable detail on the functioning and meaning of workplace activism at that time, provided by workers with recent experience of it. The precise moment at which Holden and Worm's oral histories were created makes them a vital source for beginning to recreate the "lost world" of the motor industry shop floor of the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition to the material generated by Worm and Holden, this project would have ideally incorporated the interviews conducted for *The Affluent Worker* project between 1961 and 1962. This omission is in part accidental. Unfortunately, the interviews with Vauxhall workers digitised for the UK Data Service were unavailable whilst I was writing Chapter Three (to which they were most relevant). Moreover, given my primary focus on workplace activism, rather than the wider concerns regarding class identity, home life and consumption dealt with in these interviews, I felt it was impractical, given time and space restrictions, to attempt to fully analyse and incorporate the 200 original transcripts housed at Essex University in addition to the large amounts of new archival material used in this thesis.<sup>113</sup>

---

112 For one excellent account using this type of source to discuss popular memories of the period, see: Martín Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent*.

113 This source has been the subject of a number of interesting contributions to debates over the nature of class identity in post-war Britain, see: Todd, *The People*, 252-261; Jon Lawrence, 'Social Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77/1 (2014), 215-239; Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*; Mike Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s : Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39/5 (2005), 929-946.

Much of this thesis will privilege “shop-floor” sources, a decision dictated largely by the nature of the task being undertaken, with union social practices and cultural norms central to the project. As a result this account for the most part takes place within the factory and only occasionally touches on workers' home lives. In part, this derives from my interest in re-creating the world of workplace culture, rather than pretending to discuss working-class life in all its aspects. The sources I chose to engage with – shop stewards' papers and agitational propaganda, oral interviews focused on work – reflect this focus and have inevitably shaped the conclusions I have reached. However, I recognise that the radical separation of work and home implied by this approach is unsustainable, workers inevitably brought priorities, problems and ideas into the factory from outside, not least amongst them one principal motivation for working in the first place – the need to provide for their household.

Nevertheless, taking workplace culture as the central concern of this project is, I argue, a defensible position given the context of the historiography. Work as a site of activism, protest and even subjectivity has not of late been an area of much priority for scholars of post-war Britain. Over the last decade historians have produced numerous histories of “social movements” and activism during the 1960s and 1970s which have largely ignored the workplace.<sup>114</sup> In this context, research aimed at filling this gap is a legitimate endeavour. An exhaustive exploration of the ways in which the changing world outside shaped factory activism would be a useful contribution to the field, but one that would struggle to co-exist within the same doctoral dissertation as the detailed exposition of workplace activism that is the central purpose of this thesis. Although I have tried to incorporate elements of home and community life at various points of my account, in doing justice to the complexity of factory life the

---

114 For instance: Adam Lent, *British Social Movements since 1945 : Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Jodi Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain: Britishness, 'Race', and the Radical Left in the 1960s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).



out-plant aspect of workplace culture has undoubtedly suffered neglect.

That said, prior to my examination of the shop-floor I will begin with the world outside the factory in Chapter Two, by studying mainstream public discourse, largely through national newspapers, political speeches, government reports and popular non-fiction social commentary. The purpose of this chapter is simple but crucial. Since my argument is that workers' power in this period should not be taken for granted, I need to illustrate the ways in which workplace activism escaped the formal boundaries imposed by the dominant culture of the period. This chapter will expand upon the idea that car workers found themselves in an environment where an ever increasing proportion of their activities were seen as damaging to the nation. The ability of some workers to ignore this hostile atmosphere will be an underlying theme.

Chapter Three will look at how workplace culture changed over the course of the 1950s, with shifts in social practices and shared moral values enabling a new range of behaviours, attitudes and pragmatic rationalities. I will assert that far from the capacity to engage in large-scale collective action being innate to workers under "Fordism", the ability to articulate a collective interest and mobilise behind it was still largely absent even after 1945. In line with the discussion of power above, I will argue that rather than a combination of the post-war settlement and the residues of "working-class traditions", it took a concerted effort by car workers to remake shop-floor culture and invent new social practices, for the militancy associated with the post-war motor industry to become possible.

I will explore these themes in more detail in Chapter Four, where I will look to understand the nature of the shop-floor social power workers had created. Using analysis of the new sources discussed above, which record individual and collective experiences of workplace activism, this thesis will look to

disaggregate workers' collective social power from that wielded by unions as institutions. Responding to the lack of attention given to the changing forms of post-war labour militancy, I will look in detail at the organisations that car workers constructed and their modes of operation. Refusing to accept a picture of trade unionism in which workers could be simplistically moved to action by the gravitational forces of economic change, I will examine how car workers' social practices enabled certain behaviours and constrained others, structuring their collective action. Phenomena like "sectional fragmentation" will be treated not as problems to be solved but as particular forms of organisation which enabled workers to exercise certain kinds of agency.

Finally, in Chapter Five I will turn to the cultural values and "pragmatic rationalities" (the framework for calculative reasoning) generated by these shop-floor cultures. I will argue that the form of car workers' social power at sectional level substantially moulded the attitudes and ideas that they employed at work, in ways that cannot be readily understood as analogous to those embedded in wider public discourse. Arguing that attitudes towards trade union militancy were so hostile in mainstream public discourse that strikes in effect constituted transgressive behaviour, I will explain how the shared values of workplace culture justified collective action. Much existing historical writing has seen the workplace solidarities of the post-war period as a simple continuation of an earlier "class consciousness"; now steadily being eroded; I will look at post-war cultures of militancy and place them in their own historical context, as cultures specifically generated by the post-war world and structured by workers' own organisations. Rather than looking to reinsert workplace culture into the historical British mainstream and reduce workers to a bland "non-Communism" and "economism", through use of rank-and-file periodicals, letters, meeting minutes and oral history interviews I will look to define the ideas, cultural norms, values, attitudes and pragmatic rationalities which drove increasing industrial conflict in this period.

## **Chapter Two: Car workers, the trade unions and public discourse 1945-79**

Trade unionism developed in post-war Britain in a wider context in which hostility toward labour militancy steadily increased in mainstream public discourse. After a comparative lull in “union-bashing” between 1945 and 1955,<sup>115</sup> over the following decades unions came in for ever more criticism from politicians, the press, social commentators, and even in popular fiction. Such attacks intensified in the 1970s as Britain experienced more major strikes and deeper economic problems. In the wake of a series of government defeats in that decade, journalists dedicated ever more attention to industrial unrest and commentary on the subject became increasingly aggressive, particularly with regard to the relatively well-paid car workers.

As I noted in the introduction, following this demonisation much historical scholarship has been dedicated to reinserting trade unionists into the historical mainstream, and to defending their activism as a conventional response to changing economic conditions.<sup>116</sup> The aim of this chapter is to chart the evolving nature of public discourse during this period in order to challenge this narrative on a fundamental level. Rather than attempting to use the economic motivations that underpinned militancy to make the case that it was in essence “reasonable collective bargaining”, I will argue that regardless of how “reasonable” workers wished to appear at this time, the social practices of much post-war workplace activism were increasingly seen as transgressive to mainstream social norms. Although post-war Britain encouraged workers to engage in collective bargaining, my argument is that between 1945 and 1977 some trade unionists (and car workers in particular) regularly engaged in

---

115 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 157.

116 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 164, 172, 175.

behaviour that was deemed out of bounds, a tendency that increased as the period progressed and as such, the nature of this criticism raises crucial questions about how activists sustained such behaviour in the face of general hostility. That many of the participants in these events saw their behaviour as “reasonable” is an indication that the meanings they attributed to workplace conflict diverged substantially from conventional ideas on industrial relations.

This chapter will analyse the changing pattern of criticism, comparing the less forthright attacks of the immediate post-war period with the more hostile ideas that emerged later. Attention in this regard has tended to focus on the 1970s as the high point of both union militancy and anti-union hysteria,<sup>117</sup> but as I will illustrate, throughout the period longer-running critical narratives were central to discussions of workplace activism. Even in the 1940s, workers who flouted official industrial relations procedures were criticised, both in the national and local press, as well as by politicians. Building on these ideas in the 1960s, industrial relations reformers looked to combat so-called “unofficial strikes” through new legislation, hoping to secure industrial discipline, and with it Britain's future prosperity (to which the motor industry was key). Such reformism would diminish in importance in the 1970s as heightened conflict saw the distinction between good and bad trade unionists begin to break down, as union power came to be criticised *tout court* and car workers in particular took their place as “wreckers of the nation”. Far from union activism being “mainstream”, as the post-war period progressed workers who participated in strikes had to operate in a context where involvement even in conventional industrial action increasingly left them open to criticism and potentially pariah

---

117 Jean Seaton, ‘Trade Unions and the Media’, in *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 256–73; Colin Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the “Winter of Discontent”’, *Sociology*, 30 (1996), 253–77; Tim Claydon, ‘Tales of Disorder: The Press and the Narrative Construction of Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry, 1950–79’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 9 (2000), 1–36; Martin Harrison, *TV News, Whose Bias?: A Casebook Analysis of Strikes, Television and Media Studies* (Hermitage: Policy Journals, 1985).

status.

## The new estate of the realm 1945-53

Although later discussions would be marked by often quite extreme hostility, in the immediate post-war period the national press ostensibly held the trade union movement in high regard. Ben Jackson has even argued that 'questioning the virtue of organised labour' in the 1940s was 'toxic' to the liberal intelligentsia and the political class.<sup>118</sup> Many commentators hailed not just its key role in war-time production but also its peacetime contribution to defending the interests of the nation as a whole. Transcending partial interests, trade unions as institutions were usually seen as a responsible bulwark of British democracy. One editorial in *The Times* in 1946 was typically positive about the future of organised labour. Hailing the unions' role in the 'day-to-day care for the removal of hindrances to output and the promotion of good understanding between the managements and the workers at the bench', the editors asserted that 'their war-time record was a proud one, and they can now look forward to retaining and improving upon the status they have gained'.<sup>119</sup>

In general, public discourse reflected the 'unprecedented sympathy' of the British state towards the working class which Jackson attributes to this period,<sup>120</sup> with outright public criticism of union power generally being restricted to right-wing Conservative MPs.<sup>121</sup> However, more significant to long-term

---

118 Ben Jackson, 'An Ideology of Class: Neo-Liberalism and the Trade Unions, c.1930-79', in *Classes, Cultures and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. by Clare V.J. Griffiths, William Whyte, and James J. Nott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 263–81 (p. 264).

119 'The Trade Unions' Choice', *The Times*, 7 January 1946, p. 5.

120 Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 151.

121 *Hansard HC Deb 02 April 1946 Vol 421 cc1112-217*; Charles Taylor MP, 'Letter: The Closed Shop', *The Times*, 22 November 1946, p. 5; John Boyd-Carpenter MP, 'Letter:

developments was the conditional character of post-war praise, which would set out the norms that “reasonable” and “moderate” trade unionists would be expected to adhere to in the years to come. Although workers' rights were widely understood to be fundamental to democracy, the circumstances under which they could be exercised were limited. Specifically, there was the expectation that where industrial relations machinery existed it should be used, and strikes which fell foul of these norms were subjected to considerable criticism.

For instance, *The Times* noted of a 1949 walkout by bus and tram workers that 'London's transport workers have fought strikes in the past in which they deserved and gained the sympathy of the public. To-day's strike is not of that kind. The sooner the participants can be made to understand that all responsible opinion is against them, the better it will be for their own cause, for trade unionism and constitutional procedure.'<sup>122</sup> The busworkers, having struck without having exhausted the arbitration procedure were attacked not only for inconveniencing the public, but also for 'discrediting the trade union movement'.<sup>123</sup>

Although Laybourn has argued that World War Two generated a 'consensus' regarding the benefits of trade unionism,<sup>124</sup> members who engaged in “disorderly” collective action were often excluded from this post-war honeymoon. As early as January 1947 *The Economist* was already lamenting the tendency of workers to follow shop stewards rather than their 'chairborne leaders' and several strikes were criticised during this period for ignoring official procedure, including ones by Coventry car workers, London gas workers,

---

Haulage Workers' Strike', *The Times*, 10 January 1947, p. 5.

122 'An Unjustifiable Strike', *The Times*, 1 January 1949, p. 5.

123 'An Unjustifiable Strike'.

124 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 157.

Glasgow dockers and South Yorkshire miners.<sup>125</sup> Criticism of these “unofficial strikes” - strikes organised without official trade union support<sup>126</sup> – could sometimes be harsh. One by London dockers saw them described in *The Times* as 'a band of stupid or defiant men' who had 'deliberately taken advantage of their key place in the country's traffic to put the subsistence and supplies of their fellow-countrymen in peril'.<sup>127</sup> A walkout by 2,500 London power-workers saw participants described as 'wilful... selfish and irresponsible' for their willingness to disrupt public services, echoing attitudes that would become an important part of trade union pathology in the years to come.<sup>128</sup>

Although columnists often acknowledged the limitations of existing industrial relations machinery, even Left-leaning papers still expected workers to participate in it, criticising those that did not on a moral basis.<sup>129</sup> Groups like dockers were a particular target because their strikes inflicted instant hardship by interrupting vital food supplies. Car workers were usually spared such criticism, precisely because their (very rare) industrial action only directly affected their employer. Although commentators were already emphasising the importance of Attlee's “export or die” production drive, only industrialists like Austin Director Leonard Lord and their supporters in the local press seem to have been concerned about union power in the motor industry at this point.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the prominence of Communist activists in Britain's car factories in this

---

125 'The Coventry Strike', *The Times*, 13 March 1946, p. 5; 'The Gas Strike', *The Times*, 14 August 1946, p. 5; 'Trouble At The Docks', *The Times*, 11 April 1947, p. 5; 'A Blow To The Nation', *The Times*, 30 August 1947, p. 5.

126 The term “wildcat strike” can be used to describe such actions, but was not used in Britain in this period except with reference to strikes in the United States.

127 'A Wanton Stoppage', *The Times*, 9 July 1949, p. 5.

128 'A Dangerous Strike', *The Times*, 15 December 1949, p. 5.

129 'Dock Labour', *The Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1951, p. 4; 'The Manchester Dock Strike', *The Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1951, p. 6.

130 Stephen Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict: Shopfloor Organization at Longbridge, 1939-1980', in *Shopfloor Politics and Job Controls: The Post-War Engineering Industry*, ed. by Michael Terry and Paul Edwards (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 54–82 (pp. 67–68).

period,<sup>131</sup> car workers also avoided much of the “red-baiting” characteristic of tabloid strike coverage elsewhere. The influence of Communists within rank-and-file groups was occasionally held responsible for particular strikes, especially by right-wing newspapers and with reference to supposed “hotbeds” of CPGB activism like the docks and Smithfield Market.<sup>132</sup> For instance, during the national dock strike of June 1948, the *Daily Express* led with the banner headline 'Reds behind strikes', an exclamation fairly typical of its stories on industrial relations.<sup>133</sup> Elsewhere, criticism of the CPGB's role in industrial relations noticeably intensified from 1948, with particular interest paid to the internal politics of the Amalgamated Engineering Union [AEU<sup>134</sup>], as well as to the balance of power within the Trades Union Congress [TUC].<sup>135</sup>

The power of these narratives should not be exaggerated. As their specificity implies (naming particular workplaces), these were rarely wholesale attacks on the trade union movement. If commentators pointed out union shortcomings in this period, it was usually in the form of proposals for minor restructuring, rather than any fundamental challenge to systemic flaws. Unofficial strikers were seen as a discrete problem rather than motivation for general criticism. Immediate post-war coverage of industrial relations, although considerable, was usually fairly even-handed and moderate in tone. Jackson goes too far in seeing attacks on trade unions as “toxic” but few major criticisms were made of the

---

131 Richard Stevens, 'Cold War Politics: Communism and Anti-Communism in the Trade Unions', in *The Post-War Compromise : British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1, 1945-64*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (London: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 168–91 (pp. 178–179).

132 'The Strikemakers', *The Times*, 16 September 1950, p. 5; 'A Wanton Stoppage', *The Times*, 9 July 1949, p. 5.

133 Trevor Evans and Guy Eden, 'Reds Behind Strikes', *Daily Express*, 29 June 1948, p. 1.

134 Following various amalgamations, this union was known as the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) between 1920 and 1967, the Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers (AEF) between 1967 and 1970, and the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) between 1971 and 1985. Union names will be used appropriately to the dates referenced, but when referring to the union across the entire period the “AEU” will be used.

135 'A Communist Offensive', *The Times*, 25 September 1948, p. 5.



movement as a whole and newspaper commentators were generally accepting of workers making reasonable demands, or even occasionally using direct action. Only right-wing tabloids tended to find labour scandals worthy of the front page, and even then usually only to denounce “red plots” rather than to attack the labour movement *per se*.

This period did however presage many of the criticisms that would come to mark discussion of trade unionism in the decades to come. Worries about “unofficial” strikes were already beginning to emerge, hinting at the narratives regarding shop-floor chaos which would mark the 1960s. A body of norms governing acceptable trade union activity, in which workers were permitted to exercise their rights only in highly-defined ways, was taking shape. Crucially with regard to the wider purposes of this thesis, even at the high point of trade union esteem, shop-floor bargaining of the sort that would emerge in the following decades was seen as transgressive. Only the relatively closed negotiations involving employers and union officials - “external bargaining” - were regarded as “legitimate” trade unionism.<sup>136</sup> Workers in the docks and elsewhere who took it upon themselves to remedy their problems outside officially-approved channels could expect hostility from press and parliament even during this period of supposed compromise. Yet it was precisely this form of industrial unrest which would expand in the years to come.

## **The case for reform 1953-68**

From the mid-1950s onwards, mainstream public discourse on trade unions began to become more critical and increasingly focused on car workers.<sup>137</sup> In

---

<sup>136</sup> Todd, *The People*, pp. 169–173.

<sup>137</sup> Chris Wrigley, ‘Introduction’, in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979: Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

part this can be explained by strikes spreading steadily across new regions and industries,<sup>138</sup> coupled with the perception that union influence, particularly in manufacturing, was deepening, as shop-floor organisations became more entrenched.<sup>139</sup> A shift in the perception of the motor industry became apparent as early as 1957, after a parliamentary court of enquiry into an unofficial walkout at Dagenham. Conducting the investigation, Lord Cameron highlighted the substantial Communist influence over the shop stewards there, as well as the financial resources they had built up.<sup>140</sup> Subsequently, tabloid newspapers reported the juicier details about the 'influence of reds' at Dagenham, highlighting the politics of individual stewards like John McLoughlin.<sup>141</sup>

Although it was the perceived Communist influence that peaked tabloid interest in the strike, it was the more conventional norms emerging on collective bargaining which would ultimately focus attention on the motor industry. In the media and in government policy-making, one concept came to define industrial unrest in Britain as uniquely unhealthy - the “unofficial” strike, any walkout outside official procedure or not officially sanctioned by the workers' trade union. These constituted 95 per cent of all recorded disputes between 1960 and 1968.<sup>142</sup> Critics saw these strikes as a particularly damaging form of industrial disorder. According to Stephen Abbott, a Conservative Party researcher, in other countries such strikes were :

*Virtually unknown. The threat of action comes after one contract has expired without agreement... Thus, employers may anticipate trouble*

---

138 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 99.

139 James Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain 1918-1979* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1984), pp. 180–182.

140 Lord Cameron, *Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute at Briggs Motor Bodies Limited* (London: HMSO, 1957).

141 Len Jackson, “‘Handbell Mac’ Deserved the Sack’, *The Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1957, p. 5.

142 Most unofficial strikes were small and short, so have less significance in terms of the number of workers involved and total striker days. See: Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, pp. 18, 109-111.

*well in advance – and, if necessary prepare for it. In these circumstances there is less likelihood of an early impact on their customers, on other industries, or the public at large.*<sup>143</sup>

The idea that British workers were uncontrollable, particularly when compared to supposedly industrious Swedes and Germans abiding by their rational “comprehensive agreements”, was a concept that would only get stronger during the 1960s.<sup>144</sup>

This disruption aside, the “unofficial” nature of many strikes reinforced criticism of trade unions largely because of their perceived “unreasonableness”. In referring to discipline and bargaining structures as “official procedure” many commentators gave agreements and rulebooks a quasi-legal status which meant that breaching them was often perceived as a pseudo-criminal act of rebellion. For Conservative MP Robert Carr “unofficial” strikes posed a particular problem and he expressed a desire to ‘strengthen the authority of official, constitutionally-appointed union leadership relative to that of the unofficial elements whose uncontrolled activities are at present one of the main causes of ... disorder’.<sup>145</sup> Whilst such concerns started with employers and politicians, they were driven home in the tabloid, broadsheet and local press, and even by trade union leaders, who largely agreed with employers on the need to curb such activities.<sup>146</sup> Thus, workers who engaged in this sort of “uncontrolled” behaviour – that is, in the most common form of strike activity - regularly confronted accusations of “unreasonableness” even prior to the high point of 1970s anti-union attitudes.

---

143 Stephen Abbott, ‘Letter: Time Lost in Industry’, *The Times*, 14 November 1967, p. 11.

144 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations, *Report* (London: HMSO, 1968), pp. 94–95.

145 Robert Carr MP, ‘Letter: Law Handicaps Role Of Industry’, *The Times*, 30 December 1967, p. 7.

146 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 36.

Beyond its disorderly nature, central to the national preoccupation with the “plague of unofficial strikes” was the supposed effect that they had on managerial decision-making. More than “normal” official action, according to Donovan Report the possibility of a “lightning” walkout meant that 'some managements lack confidence that the plans they make and the decisions they reach can be implemented rapidly and effectively or, in extreme cases, at all.'<sup>147</sup> Similar fears were expressed in *The Guardian* in 1960, demonstrating the longevity of fears around shop-floor militancy and industrial inertia; 'the fear of “what might happen” if this or that were done to forestall a strike, or to lessen the damaging consequences of a strike, constantly paralyses action by trade unions, employers, and the Government, and confirms the blackmailing power of small militant minorities.'<sup>148</sup> Unofficial strikes were seen as a threat to firms' ability to reform working practices and remain competitive.

Criticism of “unofficial” strikes may occasionally have acted as a substitute for more direct forms of “red-baiting”, but taken in conjunction with other issues, it was the economic impact of such disruption that really came to define criticism of trade unions. Rather than any potential threat to democracy, organised labour was feared for its capacity to halt economic progress and exacerbate Britain's relative decline. In 1961, long before the debate on industrial relations became *the* urgent political issue, social commentator Michael Shanks described the trade unions as 'the greatest institutional barrier to Britain's becoming a genuine dynamic society'.<sup>149</sup> Shanks accused trade unionists of “modern luddism”, highlighting their lack of interest in productivity. Three years before Harold Wilson won the 1964 election with the promise of a “scientific revolution”, Shanks argued that workers' organisations were now standing in the way of Britain's industrial progress. Unable to grasp that future prosperity depended on 'the extent of his productivity', the British worker was held

---

147 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, p. 112.

148 'The Fear of Strikes', *The Guardian*, 2 May 1961, p. 8.

149 Shanks, *Stagnant Society*, pp. 68–74.

responsible for “the stagnant society”.<sup>150</sup>

The idea that, if better managed and rationally deployed, workers could reach much higher levels of productivity was later echoed in the Donovan Report, and was also a feature of media coverage of strikes, eventually forming part of the industrial relations policies of both Labour and the Conservatives. At the centre of this debate over efficiency was the venerable idea of “restrictive practices”, defined by Donovan as any ‘rules or customs which unduly hinder[ed] the efficient use of labour’,<sup>151</sup> specifically referencing four principal features - time-wasting to ensure overtime would be available, overmanning and the under-use of “mates”, the acceptance of low standards of work as normal, and poor timekeeping.<sup>152</sup> Donovan's report left the description of “restrictive practices” vague, retaining the feel of technical vocabulary whilst remaining ambiguous enough to encompass everything from generic idleness to complicated apprenticeship arrangements and closed-shop rules.

In concrete terms what worried many commentators was “over-manning”. For instance, one editorialist claimed in 1967 that the steel industry retained an excess of 100,000 workers as a consequence of ‘spasmodic industrial unrest’.<sup>153</sup> Unions were accused of using their power on the shop floor to keep workers under-used, preventing the dynamic reallocation of labour. The tendency of British industry to fall behind other European states in terms of output<sup>154</sup> reflected the obtuse nature of workers who refused to recognise where their true interests lay. Accusations relating to “restrictive practices”, systematic overmanning, excessive over-time, rejection of work study methods, inter-union and demarcation disputes, unofficial strikes, held many trade unionists (if not

---

150 Shanks, *Stagnant Society*, p. 61.

151 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations, *Report*, p. 77.

152 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations, *Report*, pp. 77–81.

153 ‘Steel’s Legacy of Labour Problems’, *The Times*, 28 September 1966, p. 23.

154 ‘An Unhappy Centenary for the TUC’, *The Guardian*, 9 February 1968, p. 6.

always unions as institutions) to be engaged in an irrational defence of old-fashioned and counter-productive privileges, launching damaging disputes over trivialities and damaging their employers and the nation. By 1968 such concerns formed part of a recognisable national narrative of the 'British malaise: the stick-in-the-mud, inefficient ways of running our industry which have allowed our living standards, no longer subsidised by cheap colonial labour, to fall behind.'<sup>155</sup>

In the early 1960s, these criticisms were expressed with particular vigour with regards to the motor industry, with concern regarding car firms' industrial relations surging after repeated parliamentary courts of inquiry and regular investigations by government troubleshooter Jack Scamp.<sup>156</sup> It was the industry's high profile problems – only dockers and miners were more strike-prone<sup>157</sup> - which led industrial relations scholars H.A. Turner, Garfield Clack and Geoffrey Roberts to write *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry* in 1967, which set out to explain the phenomenon of the car firms' poor strike record and was read with great interest by the Donovan Commission.<sup>158</sup> Cars were a key export industry and, as I noted in the introduction, a crucial area of competition for Britain as a “modern” industrialised nation. Thus the deficiencies of British motor firms, where productivity had largely stagnated between 1955 and 1965,<sup>159</sup> were often taken as signs of a more general decline. Workers' refusals to abide by official procedures and their readiness to defend “restrictive practices” were often interpreted as potentially damaging not just to their employers but to the nation as a whole.

---

155 'An Unhappy Centenary for the TUC'.

156 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 344.

157 As measured by recorded strike days per worker. See: Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 97.

158 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 7–19; Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 102–3.

159 Timothy R. Whisler, *The British Motor Industry, 1945-1994 : A Case Study in Industrial Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 198.

Along with this threat to the national economy, the power of organised labour was also understood to menace the individual. By the mid-1960s the rights of union members and of the “conscientious objector” - principled non-trade-unionists - had become an important part of anti-union criticism, with the capacity of workers to oppress their colleagues finding expression in the debate around “the closed shop” (compulsory trade union membership). One notorious case revolved around another car factory, the BMC Service works in Oxford. The newspapers reported that in the wake of one unofficial strike, a works committee<sup>160</sup> meeting had constituted itself as a workers' court and sat in judgement on members who had refused to participate. The stewards, some of them members or sympathisers of the Trotskyist SLL had sentenced their fellow workers to a small fine, apparently under the shadow of a noose. The accusation levelled at the stewards was that they had intimidated their fellow workers, a practice which the press dubbed “Cowleyism”, and raised several times during the 1966 general election.<sup>161</sup> The powers wielded by trade unions in the workplace were often felt to be unreasonable and undesirable. The right to compel individuals to join in order to hold a particular job, and the attendant ability to get non-unionists dismissed came into conflict both with managerial hiring prerogatives and the idea that free labourers in a democratic society had the right to reject union membership.

### *Orderly collective bargaining*

During the 1960s a wide array of trade union practices came to be deemed pathological, including 95 per cent of strikes, the closed shop and the defence of existing working arrangements. Thus many union members, regardless of

---

160 A “works committee” is the executive body of all the trade unions represented within a factory, usually consisting of the convenors (leaders) and deputy convenors of all the mass-member unions and often a further representative for the craftworkers.

161 ‘Consent or Compulsion for the Unions?’, *The Guardian*, 14 March 1966, p. 8.

how they understood the activities they participated in, found themselves contravening the social norms as laid down by the two dominant political parties and by virtually all national daily newspapers. On occasion, the activities of factory organisations like BMC Service works committee even saw workers subjected to direct attack from politicians and press. However, public discourse in this period still maintained a degree of acceptance of some form of “moderate trade unionism”, which members were encouraged to take up.

Indeed, it was notable, certainly up to the early 1960s, that many commentators continued to exercise restraint when they talked about the problems of industry. Editorials written about strikes often strove to balance the grievances of both sides, and newspapers regularly published letters by trade unionists explaining their cases.<sup>162</sup> Debates around industrial relations did focus on the need to reform institutions and modify behaviours, but for the most part presented the problems of industry as solvable issues which, rather than being indicative of a national crisis and decline, were simply obstructions which could be dealt with by intelligent legislation.

For instance, in one January 1960 editorial complaining at the state of motor industry labour relations, *The Times* outlined how the previous year had been the worst on record for strikes. Although evidently worried about this state of affairs, the article was careful to apportion blame equitably: ‘on the one hand the labour policy of some of the firms is inadequate and on the other... groups of shop stewards are deliberately fostering trouble’.<sup>163</sup> The writer went on to discuss the effectiveness of collective bargaining machinery, and to wonder:

---

162 R.P. Nelson, ‘Letter: “Tax-Loss” Strikes’, *The Times* (London, England, 6 February 1960), p. 7; A.J. Irvine, ‘Letter: Competition In Transport’, *The Times*, 10 February 1960, p. 11; Lester Magness, ‘Letter: The Miners’ Case’, *The Times*, 16 February 1960, p. 11; K.W. Wedderburn, ‘Letter: The Seamen’s Dispute’, *The Times*, 23 August 1960, p. 9; B. Anne Godwin, ‘Letter: Typists’ “Walk-Out”’, *The Times*, 24 August 1960, p. 9; W.S. Barratt, ‘Letter: Industrial Unrest’, *The Times*, 1 September 1960, p. 11.

163 ‘The Disruptors’, *The Times*, 27 January 1960, p. 11.



'Would it mend matters if the motor industry had its own separate negotiations and procedures?'<sup>164</sup> In this case the problems provoked Goldthorpe's extended commentary, but the solutions offered were relatively minor adjustments to out-of-date institutions.

Public discourse on trade unionism remained, as it had been in the immediate post-war period, principally concerned with defining legitimate workplace activism and the 1965-68 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations was fairly typical of these tendencies. The appointment of the commissioners, with two trade unionists – Alfred Robens and George Woodcock – and two liberal industrial relations scholars – Otto Kahn-Freund and H.A. Clegg – demonstrated that the “trade union problem” remained a matter for reform rather than a crisis, and it was only later that more alarmist calls to “take on the union barons” would become central to the debate. Although such opinions had a presence in public life, they were largely marginalised and the Donovan Report was careful to assert that industrial relations were not in the grip of unmanageable chaos, stressing that the number of strikes in Britain was not especially high in comparison to other industrialised nations.<sup>165</sup> The report even emphasised its appreciation of the much-maligned car plant shop steward: 'Our clear impression ... is that shop stewards in the motor industry, like shop stewards elsewhere, are in general hard-working and responsible people who are making a sincere attempt to do a difficult job.'<sup>166</sup> In each of its conclusions, the report emphasised the extent to which minor reforms - not including sanctions, legally enforceable contracts or trade union liability - would solve the majority of problems in industry.

Clearly then, in the 1960s, many commentators still believed in a form of normal, “responsible” trade unionism, even if they found that many actual

---

164 'The Disruptors'.

165 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, p. 11.

166 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, p. 102.

manifestations of worker activism diverged from it. Indeed, editorialists, newspaper letter-writers, politicians and government reports all continued to acknowledge an abstract “right to withdraw one’s labour” as necessary for the effective exercise of civil liberties.<sup>167</sup> As in the previous period, ideas of healthy workplace activism drew on norms which divided the “reasonable” from the “unreasonable” and although outright support from mainstream public commentary for particular strikes was rare, the ways in which trade unionists defended disputes reveal the qualities that such an event might be expected to have. Taking the 1966 National Union of Seamen strike as one example, correspondents were keen to emphasise the difficulty that long hours on-board ship entailed for seamen. Other letters noted that seamen were badly-paid relative to factory workers and in comparison with seamen in other countries.<sup>168</sup> *The Times* editorial on 16 April accepted many of the arguments presented by the seamen, agreeing that their pay was insufficient considering the inconvenience of their work. The normative aspect of such qualified support is confirmed by the same paper’s outright rejection of another claim put forward by the National Union of Railwaymen earlier that year, on the grounds that railworkers were adequately remunerated and the industry itself was not “paying its way”.<sup>169</sup>

The differing reception of the railworkers and seamen’s “genuine grievances” are revealing of the dominant value system in public discourse on trade unionism in this period. In contrast to the individual pay negotiations of middle-class professionals, which supposedly reflected status and skill, the collective

---

167 Examples of such attitudes can be found in the debates around the Donovan Report, where remedies focused not on strikes *per se* but on problematic unofficial disputes, see: ‘Mr Heath’s Home Work’, *The Times*, 4 June 1968, p. 9; ‘Dilemma of the Unofficial Strike’, *The Times*, 1 March 1968, p. 23; Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations, *Report*, pp. 111-112; Robert Carr, ‘Letter: Law Handicaps Role of Industry’, *The Times*, 30 December 1967, p. 7; Edwin Brooks, ‘Letter: Lost Working Days’, *The Times*, 3 January 1968, p. 9.

168 Ken Coates and Anthony Topham, ‘Letter: Seamen’s Strike’, *The Times*, 21 June 1966, p. 23; Nigel McCreery, ‘Letter: The Seamen’s Strike’, *The Times*, 14 June 1966, p. 13.

169 ‘Showdown’, *The Times*, 20 January 1966, p. 13.

bargaining of manual workers was expected to be conducted with the interests of the national economy in mind. In private industry workers had to consider the profit levels of the company concerned, in addition to the price rises that might be inflicted on the consumer. In national corporations such as the railways and the mines, it was the level of subsidies which might be needed to fund wage rises that was deemed to supersede the particular interests of the workforce. Although these ideas were never related to car workers in *this* period, they would become increasingly important in the 1970s, as economic problems saw car firms being bailed out, subsidised and nationalised.

Normative expectations for negotiations began to reflect these sorts of calculations, reflecting the growing importance of “productivity bargaining”. This ideal of industrial relations, where managers raised pay and conditions in line with increased output, based itself firmly on a “productivist” notion of economic rationality. As efficiency in the factory rose and each worker became more productive, the wealth of the firm and the nation increased, allowing for better living standards. The Donovan Report was a key advocate of this sort of agreement, paying particular attention to what it saw as “best practice” at three firms; ICI, Esso and The Steel Company of Wales, each praised by the Commission for introducing work-study based manning, more efficient work practices, flexibility in task division, the abolition of output limitation, as well as suppressing tea breaks and other interruptions, and securing worker acceptance of some redeployment and redundancy.<sup>170</sup> These firms, in essence, exchanged higher pay for higher output from a smaller workforce, through making their employees work harder and in more flexible ways. Such agreements were particularly advocated for the increasingly uncompetitive motor industry, and eventually became part of car firms' industrial relations strategies.<sup>171</sup>

---

170 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 83–85.

171 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 107–108; Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, pp. 338–350; Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 107–

From the perspective of many commentators, the pay rises handed out to an amorphous army of manual workers, seemingly as a reward for their collective belligerence, had always seemed unfair in comparison to the middle-class conception of “getting on” based on individual merit, an injustice often mentioned when white-collar workers such as teachers or civil servants went on strike.<sup>172</sup> The ideal of productivity bargaining - swapping increased effort for a rise in real wages – appeared to fit with the ideal of “meritocracy”, where the hardest working and most useful would prosper, an idea that Ben Jackson argues was becoming increasingly important even to many left-wing egalitarians at this time.<sup>173</sup> The pathology of labour militancy, where workers obtained greater rewards through refusing to co-operate with their employers, rejecting the official industrial relations procedures and neglecting economic progress, was contrasted with the economic values of public discourse as a whole and compared with an ideal trade unionism in which workers abided by the rules, accepted modernisation and exercised their “right to strike” only when significantly mistreated.

For many union members and particularly car workers, the forms of activism they participated in were regarded in most sectors of public discourse as outside these norms and by 1969 even figures ostensibly on the Left of the Labour Party like Barbara Castle, were openly wondering if free collective bargaining could remain feasible, as workers began to be held collectively responsible for Britain's economic health.<sup>174</sup> The idea that many trade union practices were hurting national prosperity foreshadowed the declinism of the

---

109; Tony Cliff, *The Employers' Offensive : Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them* (London: Pluto Press, 1970), pp. 39–57; Stephen Young and Neil Hood, *Chrysler UK : A Corporation in Transition* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1977), pp. 229–231.

172 ‘Keeping Up the Levels’, *The Times*, 5 December 1960, p. 13; ‘White-Collar Unions’, *The Times*, 31 August 1961, p. 9.

173 Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British Left*, pp. 164–169.

174 Maguire, ‘Labour and the Law’ p. 55.

1970s. For workers, particularly for active “militants”, organising collective action (or even simply objecting to changes to their working conditions) increasingly involved transgressing conventional social norms, especially when such action took place outside official bargaining machinery. The ways in which they were able to do so are central to this thesis and will be explored in depth in later chapters.

## **Wrecking the nation 1968-79**

By 1968 industrial relations had become one of the most significant issues in national politics, vying with cost of living and unemployment in polls on voter priorities.<sup>175</sup> The number of disputes then rose sharply, remaining high until the mid-1980s, with peaks in 1972, 1974 and 1979. Disputes reached new areas of industry<sup>176</sup> and there was a sharp upturn in the number of major strikes – involving more than five thousand striker days - with over one thousand such disputes recorded between 1969 and 1973.<sup>177</sup> With a changing pattern of industrial strife, public discourse on trade unions shifted in tone, theme and increased in quantity, coverage of strikes constituting 25 per cent of main lead stories in national newspapers by 1977.<sup>178</sup> This development was reflected in *The Times*, which in 1974 published a total of 167 letters and 54 editorials on the subject of strikes, over three times the number they had published in 1968.<sup>179</sup> As we shall see, public commentary of this type also became markedly more apocalyptic in tone, invoking amongst other things the spectre of inflation in the Weimar Republic, the notion that Britain was becoming ungovernable in

---

175 Richard Copsey and N.W.C. Woodward, ‘The British Economy in the 1970s : An Overview’, in *Britain in the 1970s : The Troubled Decade*, ed. by Richard Coopey and N.W.C. Woodward (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 1.

176 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 135.

177 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 154.

178 Seaton, ‘Trade Unions and the Media’, p. 261.

179 This statistic was generated by searching for “strike” and “trade union” in *The Times Digital Archive* (<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/times.aspx/>) and then marking all relevant results.

the face of trade union power (most famously invoked in the February 1974 general election) and the possibility that militants were directly aiming to wreck the British economy.

New conditions shifted the meaning of certain tropes and introduced new ones. The most distinctive feature of the pathology of the previous period – unofficial strikes – diminished in importance in the late 1960s and the 1970s, as the disruptive effects of unsanctioned walkouts began to seem less significant in the face of more large, official strikes.<sup>180</sup> Despite the two main government industrial reform projects – *In Place of Strife*<sup>181</sup> and the 1971 Industrial Relations Act – aiming to prevent “lightning strikes”, by the time the latter was passed, commentary on the matter had virtually ceased, with *The Times* mentioning this aspect of workplace conflict in just two editorials in 1970 and not at all in 1971. In 1972 an article in *The Guardian* preferred to talk of “ill-discipline”, “chaos” and “disorder” rather than use the vocabulary of the previous decade.<sup>182</sup> In just three years, the wildcat strike had thus passed from being the defining aspect of the “British disease” to being almost irrelevant. The profound concern over industrial procedure dissipated as unions began to sanction more dramatic disputes.

The “unofficial strike” narrative was replaced by a rising concern about strikes in general and their impact on the nation and its citizens. Partially, this resulted from a combination of changing tactics and expansion to new sectors. Industrial disputes began to create more disruption to vital public services like electricity, rubbish collection, fire-fighting, health services and food supplies. In 1970, two disputes, featuring engineers in the electricity industry and local authority rubbish collectors, generated considerable commentary, most of which ignored

---

180 McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide', p. 108.

181 A government white paper on trade union reform written by Labour Minister of Employment Barbara Castle in 1969.

182 'A Battle with No Winners', *The Guardian*, 28 June 1972, p. 12.

workers' grievances, focusing instead on the suffering of the community in the face of blackouts and accumulating rubbish. These were followed by the 1972 miners' strike, which threatened electricity supplies, and disruption continued with a strike of hospital ancillary workers in 1973, and the introduction of the three-day week in 1973 in anticipation of following years' coal strike.<sup>183</sup> The effect of these strikes on the general public was often cited as evidence of trade union callousness, a trope that would be mobilised again during the 1978-79 "Winter of Discontent".<sup>184</sup>

Militants were regularly accused of ruthlessly attacking the community. E.P. Thompson's essay 'Writing by Candlelight', originally published in *New Society* in 1970, parodied the often far-fetched claims of many newspaper letter-writers of the time:

*Reading the press one learns that one has been living through little less than cosmic disaster... Outside there, in the darkness, the nation has been utterly paralysed for week upon week; invalids dependent upon "continuously operating" kidney-machines lived two or three to every street; armed robbers prowled the darkness; not a hospital in the country that was not lit solely by candles, with surgeons operating upon month-old babies by the light of a failing torch.*<sup>185</sup>

Many letters regarding strikes were scarcely less alarmist than Thompson's

---

183 McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide' pp. 108–109; Ben Curtis, *The South Wales Miners; 1964-1985* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 90–123; 'More Join "Dirty Jobs" Strike', *The Times*, 27 October 1970, p. 2; Andrew J. Taylor, 'The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 151–87 (p. 158,166); R.Sampson and others, 'Letters: Rights and Duties of Hospital Workers', *The Times*, 10 March 1973, p. 15.

184 Martin Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent*, pp. 106, 123–128.

185 E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980), p. 45.

satire and the power workers' "work-to-rule" saw *The Times* publish more than thirty letters on the subject, worrying about hospital patients, mothers and babies, the elderly and the various bleak possibilities that could befall them in the darkness.<sup>186</sup>

Parallel to this narrative ran the idea, particularly important in the ongoing criticism of car workers, that disruption had a disproportionate effect on reluctant strikers and families. One manifestation of this was occasional stories picked up by the national press, in which the wives of strikers were mobilised as victims. This was most prominently the case in a strike at Cowley in 1974 in which national newspapers rallied behind what they called 'The Miller Movement', a group of car workers' wives angry about their husbands losing pay through strikes. The leader of the campaign, Carol Miller, briefly became a front page feature in tabloid newspapers that supported her crusade.<sup>187</sup> The idea of the wives campaign was that constant strikes, organised by a troublemaking minority, were making it impossible for laid-off workers and their families. Miller, interviewed in the *Daily Mirror*, outlined her particular plight. 'Ever since I got married thirteen years ago, it's been a fight... Now, just when we are almost over the hill, everything we have striven for is slipping through our fingers'.<sup>188</sup> Tabloids opposed to union militancy used the distance between the factory activism and the home to drive home the message that strikes hurt "ordinary people". Thus even groups like car workers, whose withdrawal of labour didn't cause general hardship, could still find "the public" - as constructed by the local and national press<sup>189</sup> - mobilised against them.

---

186 P.F.D. Tennant and others, 'Letters: Effects of Electricians' Work to Rule', *The Times*, 12 December 1970, p. 11; H.T. Smith and others, 'Letters: Should Interruptions in Vital Services Be Forbidden by Law?', *The Times*, 11 December 1970, p. 13.

187 Margaret Hall, 'Revolt of the Fed-Up Wives', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1974, p. 1; John Kay and Brian Dixon, 'Ban Sex for Strikers', *The Sun*, 23 April 1974, p. 1.

188 'What I Am Fighting for - Carol Miller', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1974, p. 3.

189 Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', p. 258.



## *Disorder*

In addition to the collateral damage caused by strikes, public discourse developed a tone of rising incredulity around their conduct and one element of 1960s trade union pathology – the relationship between the collective and the individual – mutated into a new narrative. Whilst opposition to the closed shop remained important, especially to the New Right,<sup>190</sup> it was now accompanied by a new element as the aggressiveness of picketing began to emerge as a major issue. Following events like The Battle of Saltley Gate - where a mass picket closed Saltley Coke Works - and the Shrewsbury 24 trial – where twenty-four building workers were accused of “conspiracy to intimidate” - many writers and politicians expressed fears over the nature of picketing. *The Observer* even included the events of Shrewsbury and Saltley alongside the troubles in Northern Ireland in a feature on “political violence”.<sup>191</sup> Such controversy followed even when it was the policing rather than the picketing that was aggressive, as was the case in the strike over union recognition at Grunwick in 1976. Despite the majority of the actual violence later being attributed to the Metropolitan Police,<sup>192</sup> the mere presence of a “mass picket” led to reports of yet another incident of militant bullying.<sup>193</sup> For many commentators, a peaceful picket, was, at best, permitted to consist of small numbers attempting to persuade pedestrians and open-minded drivers to stop and talk before entering their workplace.<sup>194</sup>

Newspaper editorialists frequently drew on similar ideas about mass

---

190 Peter Dorey, ‘Individual Liberty Versus Industrial Order: Conservatives and the Trade Union Closed Shop 1946–90’, *Contemporary British History*, 23 (2009), 221–44 (pp. 228–231).

191 Ivan Yates, ‘Keeping the Peace - 2: At Home: Ivan Yates Reflects on Political Violence’, *The Observer*, 20 August 1972, p. 6.

192 Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1987), pp. 296–301.

193 ‘The Argument Of Numbers’, *The Times*, 25 June 1977, p. 15.

194 ‘The Short Way To Discredit Unions’, *The Times*, 18 October 1977, p. 17.

intimidation when discussing notions of trade union democracy. In this context, the mass meeting, where thousands of workers gathered to vote by show-of-hands was heavily criticised. Surrounded by their peers and manipulated by the platform, commentators asserted that such conditions made truly democratic votes impossible.<sup>195</sup> Even where critics approved of the results of such meetings, as they did when Vauxhall workers voted against strike action in October 1978, leader columns still attacked unions for their failure to adhere to liberal democratic norms.<sup>196</sup> The implication that car workers (and others) were incapable of conducting any sort of democratic life was axiomatic, certainly in the popular press and often in broadsheet newspapers. The image of individuals being bullied into striking via the intimidation of a mass vote was a common one in anti-union rhetoric, and regularly mobilised in explanations of why militants held such sway.

### *Declinism and crisis*

These narratives of interference with basic liberties fused with more general concerns surrounding the state of the country. Police helplessness in the face of large numbers of pickets and their allies raised the spectre of lawlessness, particularly in light of the inability of the Heath government to secure obedience to the 1971 Industrial Relations Act.<sup>197</sup> The perceived lack of respect for any kind of authority, even that of an elected government, was relatively easy to combine with other preoccupations of the socially conservative and fed into more general ideas regarding Britain's economic and geopolitical decline. As Jim Tomlinson notes, although narratives of declinism were broader than mere criticism of industrial relations, the trade unions were usually at the centre of

---

195 'What Vauxhall's Vote Means', *The Times*, 25 October 1978, p. 19; 'Out To Win A Bad Name', *The Times*, 6 April 1971, p. 17; Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, pp. 110–111.

196 'Hands down for Democracy', *The Guardian*, 9 November 1978, p. 14.

197 Andrew J. Taylor, 'The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions', pp. 160–171.

these critiques.<sup>198</sup> As commentators pointed to Britain's comparatively slow output growth, long-standing perceptions surrounding productivity and efficiency became further entrenched in the 1970s, as the events of the decade began to generate feelings of stagnation, interrupted only by moments of crisis generally related to the trade unions. As one editorial in September 1978 put it, the unions were 'probably the major cause, of Britain's dreadful record of low productivity' and were responsible for the 'depressing, inefficient, illiberal and deeply repugnant' way in which the country was run.<sup>199</sup>

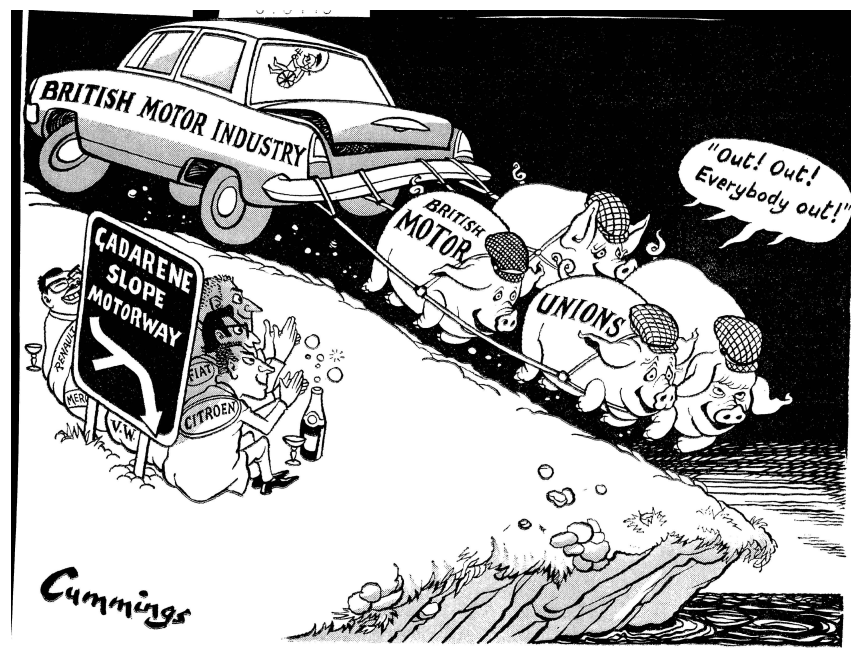


Figure 1: British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent [Hereafter BCA], Michael Cummings, *Evening Standard* ((c) Express Syndication Ltd.), 7 August 1970 .

The centrality of car workers in these narratives was reflected regularly in the cartoons of the tabloid press, especially those by Michael Cummings. As *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* [see over] show, the jokes often hinged on the supposed laziness of motor industry strikers and the damage they inflicted on the nation. The August 1970 cartoon depicting the motor unions as flat-capped pigs, dragging a car over a cliff with Britannia helpless in the back and foreign

198 Jim Tomlinson, 'Economic Growth, Economic Decline', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 83.

199 'They Cannot Do Their Job', *The Times*, 2 September 1978, p. 13.

competitors cheering them on, was by no means the most offensive tabloid offering regarding car workers, who were wished a variety of disturbing fates in pictorial form during the 1970s; including mass suicide, the guillotine and a one-way ticket to Greece's military dictatorship.<sup>200</sup>

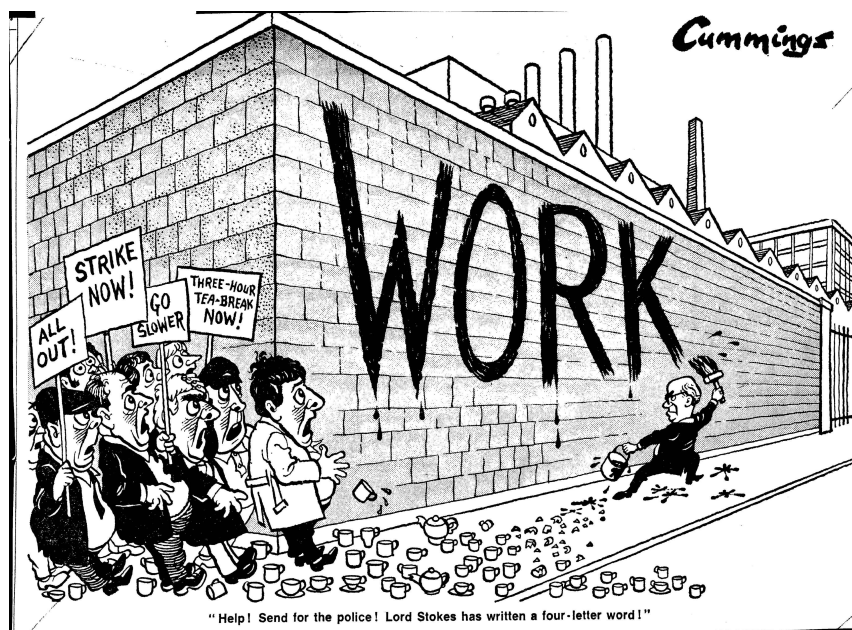


Figure 2: BCA, Michael Cummings, *Evening Standard* ((c) Express Syndication Ltd.), 27 February 1970.

In these cartoons laziness was added to the familiar 1960s accusations of restrictive practices, deliberate overmanning and opposition to new technology. Such ideas connected easily with other features of British declinism, like the concept of the “lame duck” enterprise; those companies whose survival depended on government subsidies. As the 1970s progressed, the perception that the government was endlessly shovelling money into a bottomless pit to support nationalised industries with indolent workforces had become almost ubiquitous in much of public discourse and epitomised by the national car company – British Leyland. One newspaper column in 1978, written by liberal turned conservative Bernard Levin, was typical in likening the company to a

<sup>200</sup>BCA, Jak (Raymond Jackson), *Evening Standard* ((c) Associated Newspapers Ltd. / Solo Syndication), 4 June 1969; BCA, Jak (Raymond Jackson), *Evening Standard* ((c) Associated Newspapers Ltd. / Solo Syndication), 4 February 1977; BCA, Keith Waite, *Daily Mirror* ((c) Keith Waite), 28 March 1976.

black hole, with caviar and champagne being poured into its ever open gullet.<sup>201</sup>



"'Ere! How did that car get on the assembly line?"

Figure 3: 'BCA, Stanley Franklin, The Sun ((c) News UK), 22 May 1976'.

Elsewhere, at another car firm, Chrysler, management complained that trade union members were 'not interested in the company's prosperity'.<sup>202</sup> The idea that the laziness of British workers was destroying industry was widespread and went beyond criticism of "militants". However moderate a worker might understand their trade unionism to be, by the mid-1970s they were no longer excluded from the kind of broad criticism shown in *Figure 3*. Stanley Franklin's cartoon is notable in that although most of the workers are depicted with reading matter, surprisingly, none of them is reading anything that identifies

201 Bernard Levin, 'The Old Firm's Soap Coupons Come a-Wheeling in', *The Times*, 11 April 1978, p. 16.

202 Young and Hood, *Chrysler UK*, p. 233.

them as left-wing. Franklin's car workers are simply lazy, flat-capped proletarians, rather than communist saboteurs, a reflection of the extent to which the distinction between the "reasonable moderate" and the "dangerous militant" was becoming less relevant, as it was replaced by accusations of laziness.

Such ideas formed part of a wider narrative about "militant" workforces bankrupting their firms, one that built on the wider declinism of economic journalists like Samuel Brittan and Peter Jay.<sup>203</sup> By the mid-1970s the attribution of British decline to the actions of trade unionists was widespread amongst both Labour and Conservative politicians. In the leader's speech at the Labour Party Conference of 1976 Prime Minister James Callaghan outlined his thoughts on Britain's economic progress. He invoked the need for a new sense of co-operation between managers and employees in an attempt to generate productivity, arguing that the British malaise resulted from 'paying ourselves more than the value of what we produce'.<sup>204</sup> The key to competitiveness was the capacity to generate sufficient profit to secure further investment and thus required workers to generate more value. Car workers were now confronted from all sides of mainstream public discourse, not just with demands to follow the official rules of industrial relations as in the 1960s, but also with the task of actively raising production and profitability in order to safeguard Britain's future.

### *Inflation and crisis*

Callaghan's great concern, alongside productivity, was inflation. In the same speech, he asserted his determination to combat the "twin evils" of inflation and unemployment, explicitly linking such problems to the capacity of trade unions

---

203 Kevin Hickson, *The IMF Crisis of 1976 and British Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 186–188.

204 Hickson, *The IMF Crisis*, pp. 102–105.

to resist government incomes policies. In Callaghan's estimation, industrial militancy hurt the most vulnerable by raising the cost of living for those on fixed incomes like pensioners and the unemployed.<sup>205</sup> Callaghan's speech, far from marking a recent conversion to wage suppression, reflected the centrality of inflation to British governments from the 1960s onwards. Indeed, Labour had come to power after an election explicitly fought over the relationship between the cost of living and industrial relations, specifically the Heath Government's inability to impose wage restraint on the NUM in 1974. Whilst the Conservative defeat in that election called into question the wisdom of having fought the election on the question of "who governs" - the government or the unions - as Nick Tiratsoo has pointed out, at the time it was widely regarded as an astute decision, and Labour's eventual victory mainly reflected the perception that they were best placed to control the unions (and thus inflation).<sup>206</sup>

By the mid-seventies, rising prices had emerged as a central preoccupation in public discourse and when industrial strife peaked between 1972 and 1974, hysteria about inflation spilled over into nightmares of Weimar Germany and a dystopian future under an authoritarian jackboot, either of or in response to the unions.<sup>207</sup> The 1974 miners' strike even inspired the usually sober *The Times* to talk in terms of warfare, warning that the country was fighting a 'defensive battle against monopoly trade unionism' and that the historical consequences of hyper-inflation had always been 'the loss of liberty'<sup>208</sup> Two months later, as the NUM moved from work-to-rule to all out strike, the letters page gave free rein to warnings about national suicide and the imminent danger to the sovereignty of

---

205 James Callaghan, "Leaders' Speech, Labour Party Conference, Blackpool", *British Political Speech Archive*, 1976 <<http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=174>> [accessed 15 July 2015].

206 Nick Tiratsoo, "'You've Never Had It so Bad': Britain in the 1970s", in *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain Since 1939*, ed. by Nick Tiratsoo (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), pp. 167–169.

207 Rene Elvin, 'Grim Lessons of Weimar', *The Guardian*, 20 November 1973, p. 21.

208 'We Cannot Afford the Cost of Surrender', *The Times*, 27 November 1973, p. 19.

parliament.<sup>209</sup> One can see why Heath came to pose the question of strikes and inflation as central to the very democratic life of the country in 1974. The combination of economic instability, disorder in the workplace and in the streets, the power of the trade unions to resist government policy, and the imagery of union members bullying the public both directly and indirectly, all contributed to the perception of crisis.

## Conclusion

As the 1970s progressed, the space within which car workers, and their counterparts in other unions, could conduct “legitimate collective bargaining” contracted, as the nation's worries over rising prices and falling productivity were collectively placed on the shoulders of all trade union members, whether militant or moderate. By the end of the 1970s public discourse on the trade unions had changed substantially. Whereas the narratives of the 1960s had revolved around the division of trade union practices into norms and pathologies, many now doubted that any normative, “responsible” trade unionism really existed. The distinction between ordinary collective bargaining and political extremism had in many ways broken down, as incomes policies and industrial relations reform projects blurred the lines between the political and the industrial. As labour militancy became more official, embracing an increasing number of major disputes, the distinction between legitimate procedural trade unionism and illegitimate unofficial strikes also disappeared, replaced by a wholesale rejection of any group of workers having the right to damage the economy, disrupt public services or even simply to achieve large pay rises. Such changes were reflected in the narratives surrounding the 1978-79 strike wave, and partially explain why those events became so emblematic of 1970s trade unionism, despite largely featuring groups of strikers with little

---

209 Geoffrey F. Bell, ‘Letter: Miners’ Claim: Urgent Need for Conciliation Machinery’, *The Times*, 31 January 1974, p. 17.



history of militancy.<sup>210</sup>

For the first time in many decades it became normal to question the concept of trade unions. Whilst the Donovan Report still accepted the basic premise of the post-war settlement - that collective bargaining was the best way to maintain fairness in industry – only a minority of those polled in the aftermath of the Winter of Discontent considered trade unions a good thing.<sup>211</sup> Workers who engaged in industrial action at this point were thus confronted by a public discourse whose norms failed to comprehend most of what they did. Relatively trivial events, like union meetings, short strikes, picketing, the defence of jobs, conditions and living standards, were increasingly becoming an anathema to a widely-accepted values which held that trade unionists should take the national interest as their starting point.

In the 1970s, car workers found themselves at the centre of these narratives. Already the focus of industrial relations reform programmes in the 1960s, the economic travails that resulted in the nationalisation of British Leyland and the bailout of Chrysler UK had contributed to accusations that bad industrial relations were leading to low productivity and profitability, and, whilst the power of the mineworkers often inspired fear and admiration in equal measure,<sup>212</sup> collective action in the motor industry rarely evoked much sympathy. The greedy indolent car worker was perhaps the most emblematic anti-union stereotype. Condemned for their strikes, their wages, and their social practices, car workers were often the pariahs of post-war Britain.

The extent to which this public discourse affected both trade unionists and the wider population can partially be seen in the responses given in public polls during the period. Although answers to such surveys were often ambiguous,

---

210 Martin Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent*, pp. 1–25.

211 McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide', p. 118.

212 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. xxii.

the consistent trend was for union approval ratings to drop from a high point of 70 per cent in 1964 to a fairly steady 55 to 60 per cent in the 1970s.<sup>213</sup> The idea that “the public”<sup>214</sup> as a whole turned against trade unions in this period should not be exaggerated. Given the high levels of criticism such a drop in approval ratings seems modest and may reflect only the loss of those whose support was in any case conditional on the less combative style of the immediate post-war era. Class position and previous experience of industrial action also produced markedly different attitudes, with working-class respondents to one survey being more likely to know of strikes they believed to be correct, and less likely to worry about “excessive” union power.<sup>215</sup>

Nevertheless, even amongst trade unionists, we can still find evidence of the effects of “union bashing”. A poll in October 1975 found two thirds of union members thought that their movement had too much power, and as many as one third saw it as the main problem confronting the nation.<sup>216</sup> Even allowing for the possibility that such results might be produced by the survey format, the context in which questions were posed and the possibility of respondents producing “correct” answers, we have to account for the paradoxical fact that many workers must have both adhered to the dominant discourse on “trade union tyranny” and participated in the type of behaviours that constituted “industrial strife”. This conclusion complicates the meaning of the “economism” used in many trade union histories as a straightforward explanation for post-war labour militancy. Even where strikers' motivations were directly wage-related, what they meant by “industrial issues” and “reasonable demands” in practice seems to have diverged quite substantially from mainstream interpretations, a

---

213 Andrew J. Taylor, 'The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions', p. 175.

214 For further discussion of how “the public” has been constructed in reporting on post-war strikes, see: Jim Phillips, 'Class and Industrial Relations in Britain: The “Long” Mid-Century and the Case of Port Transport, C. 1920-70', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), 52-73 (p. 70); Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', p. 258.

215 Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', pp. 266–268.

216 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. xi.

fact of which the press and politicians never ceased to remind them. As I will argue in the remainder of this thesis, the way in which “militants” attempted to motivate less committed workers to participate in collective action often reflected the ways in which they came to terms with these contradictions.

Narratives of disorder were a consistent context for workplace activists, and car workers often found their actions attacked by their own local newspapers, Labour politicians and left-leaning tabloids. Yet even amidst twenty years of rising hostility significant groups continued to generate the cultures, behaviours and practices which were deemed pathological by this dominant discourse. Given their reputation and the widespread condemnation of their trade union practices, attempts to explain such behaviour in terms of the conventionality of workers' attitudes seems misplaced, even if labour historians have correctly downplayed the influence of Leninism.<sup>217</sup> However moderate car workers may have felt their industrial activism to be, throughout this period workers who stepped outside officially-prescribed norms for behaviour were seen as transgressive and potentially damaging to the nation. Acknowledging this, rather than pretending that a form of “reasonable” trade unionism predominated, is an important step in coming to understand this period and enables us to ask key questions. Why did workers, ostensibly untouched by radical ideas, come to engage in these sorts of collective behaviours? Why did they see their activities as “reasonable” and “common sense” rather than “destructive to the nation”? Some sort of divergence between how car workers understood their working lives and how they were seen by wider society seems inevitable. Of necessity, that divergence must have required a process whereby workers rejected, incorporated or ignored different elements of these mainstream narratives and conceptual frameworks, in order to produce and re-produce a parallel value system with which to sustain their activism.

---

217 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 295–296.

### **Chapter Three: Organising the car factories, 1945-65**

From 1945 industrial relations in the British motor industry developed in such a way that by the 1960s many factories had acquired several traits considered problematic by politicians, media commentators and even many trade union officials, developing the majority of the vices identified with the “British disease”. As Les Kealey, a national official of the TGWU, put it: 'a number of our stewards have got into the habit of trying to solve their own problems'.<sup>218</sup> Kealey was discussing the growing tendency of workers to engage in self-directed “unofficial” strikes. As we have seen in Chapter Two, from the late 1950s such disputes had become a major concern of government policy with regular interventions in the form of courts of inquiry, the Motor Industry Joint labour Council and eventually a royal commission.<sup>219</sup>

Car workers were one of several groups of manual workers understood to wield considerable power, often outside official bargaining institutions. Yet the exact origins of this power are relatively obscure. Contemporary researchers pointed primarily to a “breakdown” of obsolescent institutions, arguing that “external bargaining” by employers federations and national union officials was inadequate for the complex world of full employment and Fordism.<sup>220</sup> Similar explanations have been offered by labour historians, including Chris Howell, who attributes increased industrial conflict from the 1950s onwards to a structural shift in the economy. As old staple industries (coal, textiles, rail) gave way to more Fordist forms of production the lack of adequate institutions for managing change within the workplace resulted in higher unofficial strike levels.<sup>221</sup> In this regard, Howell goes further than much of the historiography, which generally offers vaguer explanations for new social forms within the

---

218 John Mathews, *Ford Strike : The Workers' Story* (London: Panther Books, 1972), p. 49.

219 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 37.

220 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 356.

221 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 16, 87–99.

motor industry and elsewhere. Keith Laybourn and Henry Pelling do not analyse in any great depth the emergence of shop-floor organisations, with Laybourn speculatively offering 'external pressures and developments' as a possible cause and Pelling emphasising the effects of multi-unionism.<sup>222</sup>

In these sorts of narratives, industrial peace was maintained so long as institutions functioned adequately, and conflict generally developed as a result of new material factors rather than anything related to worker activism. This attitude has been encouraged by the general historiography around the “post-war settlement”, which has traditionally held the war and the social reforms that followed it to be *the* great transformative moment upon which advances in living standards were based. Ross McKibbin, amongst others, has talked of 'the redistribution of social esteem'<sup>223</sup> that occurred during and after the conflict, whilst Kenneth Morgan and Arthur Marwick have both echoed the idea of a “people's peace” where the fundamental basis for a state rescue of the working class was laid under the Attlee administration.<sup>224</sup>

This tendency was echoed in much of the commentary around the phenomenon of affluence. 1950s concern over the fortunes of the Labour Party sparked discussion over the declining influence of labour movement values, prompting the kind of introspection found in Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956) and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Both reflected similar concerns, worrying that a classless mass culture was replacing the tight knit working-class communities of the inter-war period.<sup>225</sup> In the 1960s, Goldthorpe *et al* argued new “affluent workers” were increasingly likely to adopt

---

222 Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 232; Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 172.

223 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures : England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 531–532.

224 Morgan, *Britain since 1945*, pp. 3–6; Marwick, *British Society since 1945*, p. 38.

225 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy : Aspects of Working Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 23.

an “instrumental” orientation to work, rather than a more traditional “solidaristic” one.<sup>226</sup> Mike Savage has noted the modern afterlife of this thesis, where ideas about the rise of “new individualism” became common in explanations for the demise of militant trade unionism, producing a number of dualisms whereby modern was contrasted with traditional, working class with classlessness, collective with individual, solidaristic with instrumental.<sup>227</sup> Consequently, occupational or class solidarities in this period have tended to be seen as a hangover from an earlier period, steadily being eroded by the pressures of a growing home-centred privatism.

Working within these paradigms, historians have tended to act as if the great qualitative change in industrial relations took place in the 1940s, with the introduction of full employment and widespread union recognition. Reid, for instance, asserts a grand continuity, grouping the trade unionists of the 1920s with those of the 1970s, and personifying much of post-war engineering activism in one AEU leader, Hugh Scanlon, who he depicts as 'squarely within the centuries old tradition of British craft unionism'.<sup>228</sup> Once offered the opportunity, workers gradually adopted the historic institutions and values of trade unionism, with changes in behaviour - be they increasing union density, the election of more representatives or more strikes – being primarily the result of social conditions. As I noted in my introduction the tendency in much of this labour history was to simply assume that workers could be mobilised in pursuit of “industrial issues” (principally wages) more or less automatically.

In this chapter I will assert that a more detailed analysis of shop-floor industrial relations in this period reveals how car workers, with little inter-war tradition of trade unionism and excluded from many of the supposed benefits of post-war corporatism, were forced to create new solidarities, new collective organisations

---

226 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 33.

227 Savage, ‘Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures’, pp. 23–24.

228 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 280–281.

and new cultures in order to confront the problems of the new economic order. The ways in which they did so were indicative not of collectivist traditions inherited from the past or changes in state power, but of an act of self-creation in which new rights were established. In so doing I will reassert the agency of the workers involved, arguing that their decisions and actions reconstituted their industrial relations in ways that went beyond the intended limits of the post-war settlement and transformed their working lives as much if not more, than did any external force. By disaggregating the capacity of workers to create social power through “communicative action” from the more static formal institutional authority granted to trade unions, this chapter will call into question much of the economic determinism that marks evaluations of militancy during the later “high tide”. In the most general sense, detailed study of these social processes will emphasise the extent to which the basic social resources required for mobilisation were the product of the activities of groups and individuals, rather than being shaped primarily by economic forces or particular social regimes.

## **Trade unionism in the motor industry before 1950**

As early as the 1980s the militancy of car workers was readily being described as “traditional”.<sup>229</sup> Such descriptions encouraged the idea that motor industry trade unionism was an expression of a continuous past, with workers defending their ‘traditional role’ using forms and ideas transmitted from earlier generations of engineering workers.<sup>230</sup> However, in most factories the influence of inter-war union organisation was limited, and traditions of occupational or class solidarity thin on the ground. Although some car factories had seen union activity directly after the First World War, since defeat in the 1922 engineering industry lockout,

---

229 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 315.

230 Jose Harris, ‘Tradition and Transformation : Society and Civil Society in Britain, 1945-2001’, in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 91–125 (p. 100).

trade unionism had only survived in coach-building firms.<sup>231</sup> Subsequently, mass production gradually became concentrated at the six largest companies, Morris, Standard, Vauxhall, Ford, Rootes and Austin, all of which were hostile to trade unionism. W.R. Morris, the owner of Morris Motors, was fairly typical in being a “hire and fire” employer. Les Gurl (an activist at Cowley), remembered that, ‘if you did something wrong you were fired on the spot – just told to get your stuff’.<sup>232</sup>

Management at the two American-owned firms was no more forgiving. At Ford, former worker Bob Lovell recalled that during the inter-war period ‘discipline was sharp in [Ford’s] factories. They were riddled with informers whose job was to spy out any militancy and report same to the appropriate department, those concerned then being earmarked for the next lay off.’<sup>233</sup> Briggs Motor Bodies on the same estate was similarly exacting and workers there had to write to the TUC begging for help in 1937; ‘as workers we plead that you use your power to make these conditions public property, as we have to be very careful owing to the well-oiled espionage system in force here’.<sup>234</sup> Although Vauxhall later acquired a reputation for co-operative industrial relations, in the inter-war period it too was an anti-union employer, one worker complaining that ‘it was hell in those days. I’ve seen men sacked for washing their hands as the hooter blew. I came in 1929, and it was just a good old sweat shop in those days.’<sup>235</sup> Later, after the appointment of the unorthodox Charles Bartlett, Vauxhall became a more paternalistic employer, offering shorter working weeks, discussion of grievances and even a company share scheme.<sup>236</sup> Yet such consideration

---

231 Tim Claydon, ‘Trade Unions, Employers and Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry c.1919-1945’, *Business History*, 29 (1987), 304–24 (pp. 306–307).

232 Greg Lanning and others, *Making Cars: A History of Car Making in Cowley by the People Who Make the Cars* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 60.

233 Ruth Frow and Edmund Frow, *Engineering Struggles: Episodes in the Story of the Shop Stewards’ Movement* (Manchester: Working Class Movement Library, 1982), p. 97.

234 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, pp. 98–99.

235 Len Holden, ‘“Think of Me Simply as the Skipper”: Industrial Relations at Vauxhalls 1920-1950’, *Oral History*, 9 (1981), 18–32 (p. 22).

236 Holden, ‘Think of Me Simply as the Skipper’, pp. 25–26.



never stretched to collective bargaining and on the eve of the war the factory was still un-unionised.<sup>237</sup> Across the motor industry, despite occasional strikes and protests<sup>238</sup> union organisation remained weak and largely restricted to skilled men.<sup>239</sup> Even as anti-unionism relaxed in the 1930s, union density only rose from 18 per cent in 1935 to 24 per cent in 1939, and amongst the semi-skilled workers who were now the majority of the workforce it remained less than 10 per cent.<sup>240</sup> With the odd exception there was very little evidence of either sustained organisation or “traditions of militancy”.

### *The rise of external bargaining*

World War Two created a more favourable environment for unionisation. With former TGWU leader Ernest Bevin as Minister of Labour, organising advanced quickly in the Coventry motor firms, led by future General Secretary Jack Jones, then Coventry District Organiser. The unions achieved their most notable success at Standard, where the previously anti-union company agreed to a substantial pay rise and a closed shop in 1945.<sup>241</sup> In this period workers at all the major firms secured some form of formal union recognition.<sup>242</sup>

However, in most cases this was restricted only to an expansion in “external

---

237 Bedfordshire and Luton Archives, Len Holden Archive [hereafter LHA], X819/11/11, Jock Smith Interview, 17 March 1981.

238 Dave Lyddon, “Trade Union Traditions”, the Oxford Welsh, and the 1934 Pressed Steel Strike’, *Llafur*, 6 (1993), 106–14; Laura Lee Downs, ‘Industrial Decline, Rationalization and Equal Pay : The Bedaux Strike at Rover Automobile Company’, *Social History*, 15 (1990), 45–73.

239 Tim Claydon, ‘Trade Unions, Employers and Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry c.1919-1945’, *Business History*, 29 (1987), 304–24 (p. 314).

240 Claydon, ‘Trade Unions, Employers and Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry’, p. 314.

241 Jack Jones, *Union Man : The Autobiography of Jack Jones* (London: Collins, 1986), pp. 123–125.

242 LHA, X819/11/12 Jock Adare Interview, 1 April 1981; Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, pp. 171–172.

collective bargaining”, mostly conducted by union officials and managers on the workers' behalf.<sup>243</sup> Of the largest firms, only Standard was 100 per cent unionised and in most factories mass membership and participation would only emerge later.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, many of the concessions employers had made during the war were later rolled back, as firms laid off war workers. Morris took the opportunity to rid themselves of “troublemakers”, dismissing most of the wartime activists at their three Oxford factories, including the AEU Convenor at Cowley in 1946.<sup>245</sup> The following year when a snowstorm shut down Oxford industry Arthur Exell, then Convenor of Morris Radiators, was called in by management and informed that workers would be sent for individually as production restarted. Two weeks passed and with other, less senior men already sent for, Exell demanded the AEU contact management on his behalf. When he finally obtained a meeting, he and a union official were informed: “We have come to the conclusion, Mr Longworth [the AEU official], that he [Exell] is a communist agitator and we don't want that sort of thing in the factory,” and that's when Longworth said, “And I don't blame you either.” So that was it.<sup>246</sup>

The AEU's acceptance of the sacking was relatively unsurprising. In line with the mainstream public discourse discussed in Chapter Two, many companies and union officials shared a conception of trade unionism in which agreements were negotiated outside the factory, with stewards as peripheral figures, responsible for signing up members and collecting dues. Such arrangements were not supposed to impinge on managerial prerogatives, including the right to freely dismiss employees. Despite official recognition, management and even some local officials connived to break up militant shop-floor organisations

---

243 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 89.

244 Dave Lyddon, ‘Workplace Organization in the British Car Industry : A Critique of Jonathan Zeitlin’, *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 131–40 (pp. 135–137).

245 Dave Lyddon, ‘The Car Industry, 1945-79 : Shop Stewards and Workplace Unionism’, in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979 : Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 186–211 (pp. 189–190).

246 Arthur Exell, ‘Morris Motors in the 1940s’, *History Workshop*, 9 (1980), 90–115 (p. 108).

and curtail their independence. Even Standard, the most union friendly of the car firms in this period, took the opportunity to rid itself of a number of union activists during a re-tooling shut-down in 1946.<sup>247</sup>

Consequently, union density at the major car firms remained patchy right up to the late 1950s. At Rootes, factory organisation clung on only by resisting attempts to fire activists in the immediate post-war period, culminating in a strike to secure the reinstatement of several trim shop workers in 1947.<sup>248</sup> Elsewhere, of the four largest firms Morris, Vauxhall and Ford were still less than 50 per cent union in 1956, and membership levels at Austin dropped to similar levels following unsuccessful strikes in defence of victimised activists in 1951 and 1953.<sup>249</sup> With union cards concentrated amongst the craftworkers, trade unionism was peripheral for most semi-skilled workers, and even in factories with more substantial membership, unions still struggled to assert themselves, dealing with small numbers of issues and rarely engaging in strikes, an indication that collective action was a less pervasive feature of workplace life.<sup>250</sup>

### *Conditions in the post-war motor industry*

Work organisation in the car industry makes generalisations about the conditions that resulted from this situation difficult. “Car workers” were to be found in a multitude of establishments - working in foundries and body plants, producing the “power train” (engine blocks, transmissions, axles) or making the

---

247 Lyddon, ‘Workplace Organization in the British Car Industry’, p. 136.

248 Steven Tolliday, ‘High Tide and after: Coventry’s Engineering Workers and Shopfloor Bargaining, 1945-80’, in *Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: The Experience of Coventry*, ed. by Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason (Coventry: Cryfield, 1986), pp. 204–39 (pp. 215–216).

249 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 23.

250 Between 1949 and 1953 the British motor industry averaged 25 strikes per year, as compared with 271 between 1969 and 1973. See: Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 315.

final automobile, or working with contractors providing other components (wheels, windows, brakes etc.) - and each generated their own particular problems. Within the different elements of manufacturing, workers were split into three groups; “directs” (mainly semi-skilled trackworkers, machinists and sheet metal workers), “indirects” (non-production workers: labourers, loaders, inspectors, drivers and storekeepers) and craftworkers (toolmakers, electricians, setters, millwrights -who usually provided or maintained machines).

Each role involved different pressures and constraints. For trackworkers the work content was dictated by the speed of the production line, whilst many machinists had more control over the rhythm of their work. Amongst the indirects, some material handlers loaded the track and were tied to its speed, whilst others, like storekeepers had more irregular work patterns. Craft workers enjoyed more job control, engaging in skilled tasks involving conceptual labour. Beyond differing roles, workers were also divided by shop and section, area and sub-area. The paint shop might consist of a section spraying bodies, another sanding, others spraying components and so on. Alongside these “geographical divisions”, some of the “indirects” and trades - like transport and maintenance – moved around, reporting to a supervision structure that spanned the entire factory. Thus there was no one experience of car work, but different jobs with different pressures and rewards.

Nevertheless, we can point to consistencies in terms of workers' rights and common grievances, especially amongst the non-craft majority. For instance, although there is little to suggest that car plants were markedly more unpleasant than other manufacturing establishments, objectionable smells, fumes and dirt constituted a part of workplace life, one for which management often failed to offer remedy. Dave Buckle, a former Royal Navy storeman who worked as a spot welder, remembered arriving at Pressed Steel Cowley: 'my first shock was the condition of the factory. It was filthy, very dark and extremely

noisy, with lead dust in the atmosphere, which glittered when the sun shone through the high, filthy windows.<sup>251</sup> Buckle later became a shop steward and eventually a “moderate” TGWU official.<sup>252</sup> In 1946 A.R. Crowe, a worker in the Longbridge Stamp Shop, wrote to the Birmingham District Secretary of the AEU to complain that his steward was ‘failing in his duties’ in accepting current ‘intolerable conditions’.<sup>253</sup> Evidently Crowe thought it unlikely management would rectify the situation and brought the matter first to his shop steward and later to a full-time official, an indication that he considered the in-factory organisation too weak to force an improvement. It was not just at Longbridge where unions and firms could be slow to react. In the early 1950s, management at Briggs preferred to lay women munition workers off rather than attend to complaints that an open door was making the shop insufferably cold.<sup>254</sup>

Discipline was another area over which car workers usually had little control. Motor firms invested supervisors with unilateral power over job allocation, overtime and dismissal, and foremen often subjected their subordinates to heavy-handed or inconsistent discipline. For instance, in one case at Longbridge in 1947, a veteran worker was suspended for swearing at a supervisor,<sup>255</sup> indicating a far stricter hierarchy than in the 1960s, when workers at some factories claimed swearing at supervisors was commonplace.<sup>256</sup> On other occasions, workers complained that supervisors engaged in victimisation, were overly exacting when recording work and gave more overtime to their

---

251 David Buckle, *Turbulent Times in the Car Industry: Memories of a Trade Union Official at Cowley, Oxford* (Radley: David Buckle, 2011), p. 10.

252 The term “moderate” is a loaded term, invoking a binary used throughout the period to divide “good” and “bad” trade unionists and carrying with it connotations of “ordinariness” and “reasonableness”. I will use this term to indicate individuals who self-identified as “moderate” and promoted certain policies, particularly an opposition to politicised activism and a commitment to avoiding strikes when possible.

253 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, Richard Albert Etheridge Collection [hereafter RAE], MSS.202/S/J/8/6, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, June to November 1947.

254 Kevin Halpin, *Memoirs of a Militant: Sharply and to the Point* (Glasgow: Praxis Press, 2012), p. 32.

255 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/6, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, June to November 1947.

256 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 142.

“blue-eyes” (favoured workers).<sup>257</sup> A similar pattern of authority was in force at Rover's Tyseley component plant, where stewards complained of 'intimidation' and disciplinary action over refusals to work overtime in 1950.<sup>258</sup> Supervisory wrath was also incurred by workers asking for time off, and stewards complained of a number of arbitrary dismissals and transfers.<sup>259</sup> The experiences of workers at Tyseley and Longbridge show that even the relatively lax managerial regimes that supposedly characterized piecework<sup>260</sup> gave supervisors sufficient scope to create friction if ill-disposed.

### *Control over the work process*

The work process itself could also create ill-feeling. Under piecework, work speed was largely dictated by the wage structure. Production workers at BMC, Rootes and Standard-Triumph (and Vauxhall up to 1956) received a basic wage supplemented by a bonus calculated according to output. Although this payment system was later seen to favour “wage drift” (wages rises in excess of national agreements),<sup>261</sup> with weak shop-floor organisation management controlled the bonus system, meaning they could use low bonuses to drive up output, making workers push themselves to the point of exhaustion. Dave Buckle's account of life at Pressed Steel Cowley recalls the physical toll of his work – ‘We were working so hard that when we stopped at nine o'clock all of our nerves would be on the jangle, and we would sit there and literally our arms and our legs would be shaking’.<sup>262</sup> Bill Buckingham remembers that he lost

---

257 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/9, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 20 October 1949; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/8, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 28 June 1949; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/4, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, September 1946 to January 1947.

258 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, Paul Worm Automotive Industrial Relations Collection [hereafter PWAIR], MSS.356/1/10/1, Rover Tyseley JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 April 1950.

259 Rover Tyseley JSSC, 3 April 1950; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/10/2, Rover Tyseley JSSC Meeting Minutes, 9 June 1952.

260 Tom Donnelly, Janet Tully and David Morris, ‘The Decline of the Coventry Car Industry 1945-68’, *Midland History*, 26 (2001), 198–211 (pp. 208–210).

261 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 14, 20.

262 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 67.

seven stone working in the BMC Service department; 'you began to run down your health... the physical effort needed to keep going month after month really took its toll'.<sup>263</sup> Management control of piece rates maintained these pressures, even as people adapted to the pace of work. Changes in production schedules, products and work processes gave rate-fixers the chance to fix new rates, and "loose" jobs - where high earnings were easier to obtain – were often re-timed. This was the case at Longbridge in May 1949, when management tried to impose reduced rates on the gearcutters, the section represented by AEU convenor Dick Etheridge.<sup>264</sup> Although the action provoked conflict in this well-organised department, elsewhere on the site rates were imposed unilaterally.

The piecework regime moulded social relationships. According to Jeanette King, a woman who also worked at Pressed Steel, 'On piecework it was cut-throat... You had to watch your back... You used to get very tense with each other because you would be working to your limit'.<sup>265</sup> Peter Vigor, who worked temporarily at Vauxhall as a fitter in the 1940s before becoming editor of the company magazine, vividly described the collective culture there:

*The discipline didn't come from the management, it came from the people themselves, because if somebody came up to me and talked to me while I was working, all the other chaps round me would shout out "cuckoo, cuckoo"... because they said I was fouling the nest... and so if it went on long enough, and if I'd got in late in the morning, or anything like that, they would bang the keys... so that everybody knew you were late.*<sup>266</sup>

The workers in Vigor's department saw intense effort and collective discipline as key to maximising wages, and put pressure on co-workers to work hard. In

---

263 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 69.

264 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/7, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 25 May 1949.

265 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 67.

266 LHA, X819/11/1, Peter Vigor Interview, 1 April 1981.

the absence of the adversarial collective bargaining that would later become common, the way in which these schemes promoted group discipline, rather than class conflict, shows how economic rationalities could be shaped by very different social and cultural norms.

At Ford, where workers received a standard hourly rate rather than a bonus (“Measured Day Work” or MDW), management depended on machine pacing and job evaluation to drive production. Time and motion experts analysed work tasks, allocating each element a timing, then maintained productivity via the speed of the assembly line. The official agreement between the unions and Ford explicitly reserved the right for management to determine these work standards. Although worker activists would eventually win some informal rights in this area during the 1950s, Ford's production line was intended to run at whatever speed management considered appropriate, a pretension that workshops without significant union organisation undoubtedly succumbed to.

### *Wages and wage security*

Whatever their other grievances, car workers enjoyed relatively generous pay. Their average weekly wage remained 33 per cent higher than the average manual worker, as it had been even in the 1930s.<sup>267</sup> Yet, control over wage levels and wage security still varied according to workplace and type of work. As discussed above, the idea of piece rates was that they were subject to “scientific” rate-fixing not negotiation. Consequently, prior to shop-floor bargaining workers had little control over wages, which rose in line with the basic rates negotiated by national union officials. Far from “wage drift” being the natural effect of piecework in the early post-war period, many car workers

---

<sup>267</sup> Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 333.



lacked any means by which to directly improve the wage-effort bargain. Under Ford's hourly rate, workers had even fewer means by which to push up their wages. Whilst pieceworkers might temporarily cheat the rate-fixer, at Ford (and Vauxhall from 1956) wage rates were determined solely in national bargaining. Consequently, challenging the company implied organising more than 20,000 employees at Dagenham alone, and depended on the blessing of usually conservative-minded national officials.

Payment methods aside, as Selina Todd notes regarding the tenuousness of manual workers' economic security in this period, the high earnings which saw car workers achieve such a degree of "affluence" depended on working regular hours, as well as overtime and often anti-social night shifts.<sup>268</sup> The availability of regular work varied according to changing demand and product mix, as well as supply problems or machine breakdowns, meaning that incomes were unpredictable. Thus even though comparatively high wages predominated, the weak shop and the non-unionist potentially found themselves at a disadvantage as their wages fluctuated alarmingly according to forces beyond their control.

Such variations were reflective of broader insecurity. Car manufacturers tended to respond to changes in the economy by recruiting or dismissing workers. This casual "hire and fire" culture operated in medium-term cyclical slumps associated with the national economy, but also in line with annual consumption patterns. Car purchases traditionally peaked following the annual motor show, dropping thereafter, and employers operated on a 'hire-after-Motor-Show-then-sack mentality'.<sup>269</sup> Such practices discouraged workers from fighting redundancy, and enabled the wave of post-World War Two victimisations that we noted earlier. The response to the Morris sackings demonstrated how little power relations had changed during the war. Despite five years of full

---

268 Todd, *The People*, p. 200; Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street', p. 514.

269 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 35.

employment and union recognition, the company was freely able to dismiss active trade unionists. The wider redundancies of which the victimisations were part also seem to have passed unchallenged, indicating the acceptance of casual employment and seasonal hiring as normal. Like other forms of managerial unilateralism this gave workers cause to hesitate prior to offering dissent, especially as the lesson of the late 1940s was that resistance might end in dismissal.

### *The post-war habitus of the car worker*

Summarising the various elements of post-war factory life, we find significant continuities with the inter-war world of work, meaning that for most car workers James Cronin's contention that by 1950 'the world of work had become marginally less oppressive' is only true so long as we emphasise the marginality of the changes.<sup>270</sup> Factories continued to be potentially dirty and dangerous places, with autocratic hierarchies and limited official recognition for trade unions. Negotiation over work effort and wages was asymmetrical at best and often non-existent. In the absence of the social practices of shop-floor trade unionism that marked everyday life in later decades, we find the exercise of near absolute managerial prerogative. Consequently, power relations in these factories shaped both the experiences of individual workers, and their behaviours, attitudes and rationalities. The dominance of supervisors, coupled with low job security and weak collective institutions, encouraged workers to accept existing conditions and not to press claims for better treatment. In the absence of a collective social power with which to resist, fatalism and acceptance were sometimes a "rational" response to the existing possibilities for change. A number of management practices – speed up, movement of labour and casualism - that would later be seen as unfair violations of "custom and practice" were widely accepted as normal and unchangeable. Even under

---

<sup>270</sup> Cronin, p. 153.

piecework, with its less intense patterns of supervision, where management controlled the rates they could encourage high output. In a world where earnings depended on reaching bonus targets, it made sense for workers to exercise strict discipline in pursuit of faster production. Cooperation rather than conflict was the norm.

The constrained nature of workers' independent collective bargaining power in the immediate post-war period – with trade unionists in the minority and most collective bargaining external to the factory – calls into question a key narrative in post-war British history. Although scholars from Goldthorpe to Savage have generally seen the post-war period as one in which solidarities based on class or occupation began to be dissolved by affluence and “privatism” (a growing shift in orientation amongst manual workers from the public workplace to the private home), there is actually little evidence that there was any strong oppositional class-based collectivism to be undermined in the first place. In *The Affluent Worker*, Goldthorpe *et al* argued that interview responses in their study revealed the 'family-centred and privatised style of life' of their subjects, noting that 'both workplace and communal solidarism appear[ed] to be in decline'.<sup>271</sup> Despite Goldthorpe's later retreat from the assertion that affluence would also see a gradual disillusionment with trade unionism,<sup>272</sup> the dissipation of labour militancy during the 1980s gave the “privatism” thesis fresh impetus and historians have continued to employ it in more recent histories.<sup>273</sup> For instance, even Michael Savage, who elsewhere contests the binaries that equated

---

271 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, pp. 163–164.

272 John Goldthorpe, 'The Current Inflation: Towards a Sociological Account', in *The Political Economy of Inflation*, ed. by Fred Hirsch and John Goldthorpe (London: Martin Robertson, 1978), pp. 186–213.

273 Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 216; Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 114–115; John Turner, p. 27; Harris, 'Tradition and Transformation', pp. 101, 110–111; Peter Mandler, 'Two Cultures - One or Many?', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Burk, Kathleen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 127–55 (pp. 134–146); David Rubinstein, *The Labour Party and British Society, 1880-2005* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), p. 139.

“traditional” with “solidaristic” and “modern” with “individualistic”,<sup>274</sup> makes similar claims in *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940*, where he argues that the strong sense of class felt by many manual workers in mid-twentieth-century Britain 'was premised on old, rather than emerging, social relations and w[ould] prove unable to recharge itself in the decades to come.'<sup>275</sup>

The limited extent of car factory trade unionism before 1950 lends weight to Jon Lawrence's challenge to this view, in which he argues for the deeper roots of working-class affluence and privatism. Lawrence asserts that in parts of Southern England and the Midlands, home-ownership, consumerism and a degree of economic security were widespread in working-class communities from the 1930s and that 'the idea of a transition from an older, homo-social male culture, rooted in work and leisure, to a new, more family-centred, culture was ... ahistorical.'<sup>276</sup> Lawrence's work re-thinks the legacy of post-war sociology, asserting that the “privatism” thesis derived from a refusal to understand prosperous workers 'on their *own* terms' and a preoccupation with ideas of “traditional” working-class communities.<sup>277</sup> Where Lawrence has disputed the novelty of post-war “privatism”, I call into question its binary opposite - the “traditional” nature of workplace collectivism. As the analysis above indicates, between 1922 and 1950 car workers had generated relatively little “occupational solidarity”. Indeed it seems that there was little “traditional class consciousness” for affluence to dissolve, nor “traditional role” for unions to defend. The years to come would demonstrate not a capacity to “recharge” collective bonds based on inter-war traditions, but actually the invention of new solidarities, through worker-driven changes in social practices and collective values.

---

274 Savage, 'Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures', p. 24.

275 Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 216.

276 Jon Lawrence, 'Class, “Affluence” and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain' pp. 273–275, 284–285.

277 Lawrence, p. 283.

It is central to my argument that it was only after the creation of these new workplace cultures (Hyman's "necessary minimum") during the 1950s that later labour militancy could take root. Neither "externalised collective bargaining" nor "traditional class consciousness" automatically generated the social and cultural resources necessary for sustained collective action and shop-floor bargaining, and in fact car workers struggled to affect their pay and conditions. The development of their later social power – the capacity to re-shape their environment and impose their will on others - was not an inevitable effect of the post-war settlement and a less militant collective culture with a more co-operative rationality was dominant well into the mid-1950s. As a consequence of conditions in the industry and different social relations between the workers, fatalism and co-operation with management also tended to dominate, and social conflict was relatively rare.

## **Organising in the 1950s**

For that to change, activists had to create new collectivities, social practices, values and attitudes, shifting the instrumental rationalities of workers within the industry. The major element in doing so was the process of "organising" - both recruiting union members, and encouraging the election of representatives, participation in group decision-making and ultimately collective action. Thus far, historians have paid relatively little detailed attention to the process by which car factories became union strongholds. Whilst Howell asserts in general that 'class conflict' was important in re-shaping institutions, this is only really addressed in abstract terms and the origins of said conflict are found outside the workers themselves, in the inability of external collective bargaining institutions to deliver the changes to working practices required by "Fordism".<sup>278</sup>

---

278 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 16, 30, 34–42, 87–120.

The worker's role in this process is largely that of the “canary in the coal mine”, reacting to dysfunction and thereby alerting the state as to the need for reform.<sup>279</sup> Alan McKinlay and Joseph Melling's work on authority relations in the British engineering industry does offer some more detailed reflections on how it is that workers set about changing social relations within their factories, but their focus on the parts of the engineering industry where unionisation began in the inter-war period, necessarily limits its usefulness in understanding post-war car factories.<sup>280</sup> Within the discipline of industrial relations, Zeitlin, Tolliday and Lyddon have examined the unionisation of British car workers in more detail, but have generally chosen to focus on when it took place and what its effects were, rather than how activists actually went about persuading co-workers. Elsewhere, attention has been even more limited, with Reid only dedicating a brief aside to the 'unusual commitment of large numbers of individual activists' and largely refusing to be drawn on the motivations behind their enthusiasm.<sup>281</sup> For the most part, the organisation of the motor industry has been treated as an inevitability.

Yet detailed examination of shop-floor documents from the period indicates that numerous problems confronted organisers in the early 1950s, necessitating a thoroughgoing re-construction of shop-floor culture prior to later labour militancy. With membership concentrated in the skilled trades, expansion was a difficult prospect. Possessed of in-demand skills, spared the pressures of the production line, and able to access a wider district-based union organisation, skilled workers often had less need to confront management to win concessions. Unions struggled to recruit the lowest-paid indirects (workers not directly involved in production) and most pressured track-workers, partly

---

279 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 16–17.

280 Alan McKinlay and Joseph Melling, 'The Shop Floor Politics of Productivity: Work, Power and Authority Relations in British Engineering, C. 1945-57', in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1 : The Post-War Compromise, 1945-64*, ed. by John McLroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 222–41 (pp. 222–231).

281 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 286.

because the promise of above-average wages and the threat of anti-union management combined to make active participation unappealing. Beyond recruitment, unions often also had problems mobilising the members they did have. In the early post-war period, relatively small numbers of shop stewards were involved with the factory organisation and there was little collective action. Without such mobilisation, workers had to rely on official national bargaining and were largely powerless to remedy grievances related to work speed, discipline, job security and working conditions.

Attitudes among the workforce echoed these limited collective powers. Many workers accepted that management would exercise unilateral control from bell to bell, and made realistic calculations as to the prospects for collective action, adopting other strategies in order to fulfil their wider life objectives. Rather than fighting to drive up wages and improve conditions, most workers looked to overtime and high productivity to supplement their wages. In order to organise their factories, union-minded workers had to achieve more than simple recruitment and recognition. They had to change attitudes and create “trade unionists”. For Glyn Morgan, AEU Convenor at Vauxhall, this meant ‘getting discipline into a strike’,<sup>282</sup> an idea reflective of more profound changes in social practices and values. In order to acquire that kind of culture, activists required not just overwhelming numbers, but mechanisms for discussing, deciding and acting together. Finally collective action had to be effective enough that participation became self-evidently beneficial to both the group and the individual – “common-sensical” in the terms I discussed in the introduction. How this process unfolded is crucial to understanding workplace life in post-war Britain, both in terms of the nature of the social relations that would characterise car factories in the years to come, and in revealing the ways in which car workers (and others) were able to influence the world around them.

---

282 LHA, X819/11/4, Glyn Morgan Interview, 4 December 1979.

How then, did workers go about the process of organising? Despite their problems, worker activists could draw on a variety of common grievances to aid recruitment. As noted above factories could be dirty, unpleasant or unsafe places to work; lower-level management could engage in bullying or favouritism; productivity demands could make work arduous, and wage and job security could be lacking. But such problems did not automatically result in new members, and unions had to employ a variety of techniques to bring in new people. One possible resource they could draw on was the trade union bureaucracy. At Dagenham, the local AEU officer, Claude Berridge, encouraged both militancy and organisation, and following the opening of Halewood in 1962, their district secretary, Sam Glasstone, was also heavily involved in unionisation.<sup>283</sup> However, such contributions were the exception and paid organisers played a limited role in developing shop-floor organisation. Worker accounts of being recruited by a trade union official in the 1950s are virtually non-existent, and shop steward documents from the main phase of unionisation (the mid-1950s onwards) make little reference to such practices. Where they contributed at all, union officers largely restricted themselves to advising factory activists.

Most recruitment was carried out by the workers themselves, at the factory. Occasionally, this took the form of recruitment *en masse*. At Tyseley the stewards would organise gate meetings, where a senior activist would stand on a box sermonising, as his comrades recruited the workers who stopped to listen.<sup>284</sup> On other occasions stewards would distribute self-produced leaflets extolling the virtues of a well-organised factory.<sup>285</sup> However, this seems to have been rare and at Longbridge shop steward documents make no mention of distributing such leaflets during the 1950s. Probably more typical was one Rover Solihull lineworker's experience: 'A chappie came up the track and he

---

283 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 80; Halpin, *Memoirs*, pp. 27–28.

284 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/10/1, Rover Tyseley JSSC Meeting Minutes, 8 August 1949.

285 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/10/1, Rover Tyseley JSSC Meeting Minutes, 10 March 1952.



said to me "you're a new starter aren't you" and I said "yes", and he said "well, my name's Jock Gardiner... and I'm the NUVB convenor for this plant... are you a member of the union?"<sup>286</sup> Where possible, recruitment took place in and around work, utilising tea breaks and lunchtimes for informal discussion.<sup>287</sup>

### *The election of shop stewards*

At the centre of this process in the motor industry was the shop steward, a figure who became so ubiquitous in post-war history that one might imagine the position had always existed. Indeed, the emergence of the shop steward as a significant force in British car firms is generally treated as unremarkable in the historiography.<sup>288</sup> Yet the system that evolved in the 1950s, where large factories elected hundreds of stewards to joint shop stewards' committees [JSSCs<sup>289</sup>] representing all types of workers, was by no means an inevitable outcome of post-war industrial relations, and indeed unpaid shop-floor "lay representatives" had not previously been a significant feature of car factory life.<sup>290</sup> In earlier periods, the few shop stewards recalled by workers mostly restricted themselves to the collection of dues,<sup>291</sup> and the emergence of the steward role as a form of "representative democracy" for semi-skilled workers

---

286 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/3/5, Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979.

287 Car workers usually had three breaks per day, two 10-minute tea breaks and one longer meal break. See: Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 42.

288 For instance, it merits no mention in the Pelling or Laybourn's principal works, and is mentioned only indirectly in Reid's *United We Stand*.

289 A joint shop stewards committee is a representative body common in most post-war car factories. It consists of the elected stewards of all the trade unions in a factory (hence "joint"). In large plants like Longbridge they could have up to 800 members.

290 On the ambivalent attitudes towards shop stewards in inter-war trade unionism, see: Tony Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong: The British Working Class, Its Trade Unionism and Politics* (London: Arrow Books, 1974), pp. 151-153.

291 Such was the memory of a number of workers interviewed in the early 1980s see: PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/23, Clem West Interview, 18 November 1982; PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/19, Eddie Shaw Interview, 9,12 November 1982; PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/11, Joe Taylor and Sam Wright Interview, November 1982. Although these sorts of recollections should be treated with caution, they do tally with Tim Claydon's work on trade union organisation in this period, see: Claydon, 'Trade Unions, Employers and Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry'.

was an uneven process, taking a variety of forms according to social conditions, individual agency or managerial paternalism.

The first step of this process, creating the titular position, was often simple. At Morris Cowley "E" Block stores a steward was elected when the one existing union member was approached by two other workers and asked to represent them.<sup>292</sup> In this case, a handful of storekeepers decided to nominate a steward and only later recruited other workers. The advantage of this method was that it required little organisation and could then be used as a platform for further unionisation, using the steward card for legitimacy and the wider factory organisation for support. However, without the loyalty of the majority of their co-workers, persuasiveness was the representative's only weapon and stewards elected in this way might struggle to mobilise their co-workers. Such a fate befell W. Cook, a tool-room steward at Rover Tyseley, who tendered his resignation in 1949, citing the lack of support from his section.<sup>293</sup> Another Longbridge worker, taking similar action in 1946, bemoaned 'the lack of co-operation of the majority of the members in his section'.<sup>294</sup> In the face of a general refusal to participate, a steward card was of little use for confronting management.

Despite such pitfalls, this was a common way of creating new activists, as even if the particular individual didn't succeed, the role could be created in perpetuity. However, unilateral declarations of stewardship were but a first step towards an organised shop, as social relations remained broadly unchanged until a "custom and practice" of negotiation and mobilisation was established. Section meetings were one means by which activists could further this process. On many occasions, when workshops organically developed a common complaint

---

292 Alan Thornett, *Militant Years : Car Workers' Struggles in Britain in the 60s and 70s* (London: Resistance Books, 2011), p. 20.

293 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/10/1, Rover Tyseley JSSC Meeting Minutes, April 1949 to May 1952.

294 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/3, Letter, C.Delaney to the Works Convenor, 20 December 1946.

they sent for a senior steward to assist with organisation. In contrast to the more speculative route taken by the Cowley storekeepers, combining elections and meetings had the advantage of providing a forum for discussion, giving activists a space in which to define the shop-floor union as a form of collective responsibility in which they all participated, rather than a type of clientelism in which stewards served members as isolated individuals.

The organisation of the gearbox assembly section at Tyseley in the late 1940s is a good example. Peter Nicholas was factory convenor, representing 1,700 workers making Land Rover components. He describes a fairly typical situation for the post-war car industry, with only the toolmakers fully-organised and other members scattered around the factory.<sup>295</sup> Nicholas had been a Communist Party member for some years and was already on Austin's blacklist, having previously been sacked there for union activity. Whilst working, he listened to his co-workers complaining about new piecework rates, telling them, 'well look, unless you want this arbitrarily imposed on you, you needs [sic] to get organized,' producing fifty union forms at the next lunch hour. Nicholas continued to make suggestions, outlining the logic of his trade unionism - 'Look, no good you being in the union unless you've got some representatives, see.' Finally, after persuading the workers to elect stewards, Nicholas discussed the solidarity that would be necessary to defend them;

*This company has got a long record of anti-trade-unionism. If in any shape or form these lads are touched by the company by means of suspension or sacking, I'm not advising the use of procedure, the only way you would protect them is, whatever they do to them, they'll do to you. In other words, if they sack 'em, you go out till they're back... [if] you don't defend them you might as well forget that you filled a form in.*<sup>296</sup>

---

295 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/4, Peter Nicholas Interview, 4 August 1982.

296 Peter Nicholas Interview, 4 August 1982.

Grievance meetings like this one were a means by which a department could be organised at a stroke.

### *Making trade unionists*

Looking at the process of organising at shop-floor level further illustrates a central argument in this chapter, that so-called “traditional” habits had to be created, propagated and proven to work through forms of “communicative action” of the type discussed in the introduction. When we look at Nicholas' account of recruiting workers we see how important voluntary action was in generating social power amongst car workers. The nature of the discussion above reveals a factory where the social practices and values of shop-floor bargaining were not second nature and had to be actively promoted in order to “make” trade unionists.

Moreover, whilst ostensibly Nicholas' experience was wholly typical in terms of “instrumental collectivism” and “economic rationality”, the way he convinced workers to join and participate in the union was not just economic. He was not simply persuading his colleagues that they were exploited, but was also convincing them that they had the right and the ability to negotiate better terms. Furthermore, he was advocating a particular model of organising, where workers chose their representatives and owed them their solidarity. Without this, he argued, trade unionism had no purpose and ceased to exist in any meaningful way.

Nicholas' pedagogical technique involved simultaneously inculcating four aspects of a “strong” shop; trade union membership, steward election, the shared social practice of striking to defend elected representatives (crucial in a

period where victimisation and blacklisting were still common in the industry<sup>297</sup>) and the moral value embodied in “whatever they do to them, they’ll do to you”. It was this entire process - from the identification of a collective interest, through the creation of a group around that interest, the invention of new social practices (electing stewards, negotiating piecework prices), and to the creation of group values (solidarity) - which was required in order to bring about “the minimum of organisation and solidarity” presumed by Hyman.<sup>298</sup>

How different workers went about this process differed according to the type of work. One obvious starting point was the grievances discussed above – working conditions, supervision, wages and job security. For production workers like Nicholas' gearbox assemblers, the piecework bonus was key and it was this type of worker who found it easiest to organise. Although piece rates could easily work against class-based collective culture, bargaining over them was the principal means by which stewards were able to persuade workmates to participate in union activity. Why piece rates proved so fruitful appears at first glance to be largely “economistic”. In the Morris Cowley paint shop, represented by steward Bob Fryer, a Hungarian immigrant and Marxist, recruitment methods were blunt:

*“Look, you are now on £10 per week on piecework”, I told them. “If you all join the union and make it a 100% shop, I can promise within nine months we will be on £20 per week.” That would be our target and we would achieve it. “Give me the strength, give me the membership, and we can do it.” Nine months later we had another meeting on Phipps Road. They all produced their pay slips - they were all over £20.*<sup>299</sup>

---

297 Lyddon, ‘Workplace Organization in the British Car Industry’, pp. 189–191.

298 Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 57.

299 Alan Thornett, *Militant Years : Car Workers' Struggles in Britain in the 60s and 70s* (London: Resistance Books, 2011), p. 7.

The rapid fulfilment and limited nature of Fryer's promise is key to understanding piecework's importance. Organisation over this issue was easy because there were regular, small-scale rate adjustments to be disputed, and concessions could be won. Even the most reluctant trade unionist found it difficult to argue against a pay rise, particularly when victories could be achieved at relatively little cost. Such pay rises could then be used as an argument in favour of the particular steward and trade unionism more generally, whilst logically implying a subtle shift in values. Crucially, such gains involved the least possible challenge to existing attitudes (important in the context of the norms discussed in Chapter Two) and involved collective bargaining on the smallest possible scale: on a section-by-section basis. Even in unorganised shops, workers took an interest in rates and in calculating the amount of production required in order to achieve their earnings target. With rates peculiar to small sections of the workforce, who could discuss their mutual interests during tea breaks and lunch hours, it was a small step to challenging timings and debating with rate-fixers. Finally, since wage rates could be compared between different groups of workers, victories in one part of the factory served as a stimulant to activism elsewhere.<sup>300</sup>

Non-production dayworkers were denied this quick route to organisation, as their wages were organised by factory-wide grades, necessarily implying the construction of larger collectivities. As a result, dayworkers often organised later than pieceworkers, with their demands barely a feature of shop stewards' meetings at Tyseley or Longbridge until the second half of the 1950s. When they did organise, dayworkers describing early activism attributed a much greater role to non-monetary issues like job allocation, working conditions and discipline. Alan Thornett, a shop steward for truck drivers at Cowley, recalled that the bulk of his early campaigning was for more control over the allocation

---

300 Jon Murden, 'Demands for Fair Wages and Pay Parity in the British Motor Industry in the 1960s and 1970s', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 20 (2005), 1–27.

of jobs, better safety standards and against 'petty discipline'.<sup>301</sup> Similarly, at Longbridge, the first mention of a strike amongst the day-rated marshallers related to a disciplinary suspension.<sup>302</sup> Stewards in these departments were unable to draw on the economic logic of the wage structure, so early organising attempts looked to grievances which (like piece rates) could be limited to relatively small sectional groups and argued for within existing attitudes amongst management and co-workers.

Even so, lower-paid dayworkers often had to wait until after the pieceworkers had established stronger union cultures before advancing their own cause. This delay, if it were repeated in other industries, may offer a partial explanation for the tendency, identified by Todd, for affluence to largely bypass unskilled workers until the 1960s.<sup>303</sup> Pieceworker activism acted as a stimulus both by raising wages and inviting comparisons, and by providing an factory-wide activist base to support the lower paid. At Longbridge, dayworker activism often took the form of demands for "lieu rate" bonuses, based on average pieceworker wages.<sup>304</sup> Concerted campaigns on such issues became a major feature of car factory activism from the late 1950s, with important strikes by storekeepers at Rootes Ryton in November 1960, Rover inspectors in 1959 and 1961, and by all Longbridge dayworkers in 1962.<sup>305</sup> Subsequently, dayworkers often discovered hitherto unknown capacities to halt production, with each of these strikes resulting in wholesale company shut-downs. Crucially for the purposes of this thesis, the late development of this sort of social power provides further evidence that ideas were as important to labour militancy as

---

301 Alan Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism: A Personal and Political Account of Organising Car Workers* (London: Left View, 1987), p. 36.

302 Etheridge Notes September 1946 to January 1947.

303 Todd, *The People*, pp. 208–209.

304 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/6, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 17 April 1959.

305 '24-Hour Strike by Rover Inspectors', *The Times*, 25 June 1959, p. 6; '200 Car Workers Walk Out At Coventry', *The Times*, 20 October 1960, p. 5; 'Strike Spreads at Rovers', *The Times*, 3 August 1961, p. 12; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/9i, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 28 May 1962.

industrial leverage and economic motivation. However crucial a group of workers was to the functioning of the firm, it was only after they had generated sufficient organisation and a base level of solidarity that they could begin to enforce their demands through collective action.

Elsewhere, the same structural difficulties that caused dayworker organising to occur so late made establishing trade unionism at Ford 'a long hard slog of battle'.<sup>306</sup> Under the hourly pay system, wage rates were a corporate issue, determined by national bargaining, and all other elements of the work process were explicitly beyond negotiation. Consequently, everyday participation in small-scale collective bargaining was not as organic as under piecework. Although the union organisation at Dagenham emerged from World War Two relatively strong, it struggled to establish a hegemonic shop steward organisation in the face of management hostility. Since Measured Day Work meant no workgroup pay bargaining, annual negotiations produced occasional impressive strikes but less sustained activism in everyday life.

Big strikes followed the rhythm of official bargaining and didn't generally work to build loyalty between members or transform workplace cultures. Generating strong sectional organisation under MDW meant using workplace problems for localised victories, and assembly plant convenor Kevin Halpin's memoirs cite health and safety as one particularly important issue.<sup>307</sup> In one incident, Halpin recalls trim shop workers refusing to continue working when management changed tack suppliers, as the new tacks apparently tasted worse, a possible indicator of dangerous chemicals.<sup>308</sup> Maintaining a clean and safe work department was a useful issue for organising because, like piece rates, these were localised issues for which stewards could take responsibility. They were

---

306 Bernie Passingham and Danny Connor, *Ford Shop Stewards on Industrial Democracy* (Nottingham: Institute for Workers' Control, 1977), pp. 1–3.

307 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 36.

308 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 41.



also 'perishable disputes' requiring immediate resolution,<sup>309</sup> and thus could not be left to the lengthy official grievance procedure. Finally, within a managerial system that explicitly excluded the workforce from discussions over pay and production, the right to work in a safe environment did not involve infringing management unilateralism, or confrontation with the attitudes of more deferential workers. Consequently, workshop conditions made for relatively easy victories in the face of a difficult employer.

Later on, stewards in strong departments would take up a wider range of issues, including casualisation, discipline, transfers and supervision. Eventually the central problem that came to dominate shop-floor conflict was the pace of production. The importance of "speed" was that employers used a combination of line-speed and labour load to vary production schedules. This could result in regular changes of effort that were readily apparent to the workforce, potentially generating conflict. One typical incident was described to libertarian socialist journal *Solidarity* by a lineworker at Dagenham in 1962. Management had initially decreed a line speed of 96 cars per hour, which the workers accepted until one morning they noticed an increase to 110 per hour. The shop steward stopped the assembly line, whereupon he was marched to the management office for dismissal. His co-workers, having heard the argument, stopped work and followed their steward and supervisor to the office, where they pressured management into disciplining the foreman for raising the line speed.<sup>310</sup> In this instance, a perceptible deterioration in working conditions produced a conflict that was won by immediate, small-scale action of the type that had become part of custom and practice, fulfilling the same function that piece rate bargaining could for pieceworkers.

Generalising about the industry as a whole, we can see that strong sectional

---

309 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 24, 41.

310 'I Work at Fords', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, May 1963, 3–8 (p. 4).

organising was crucial. With no automatic connection between grievances and collective action, activists mobilised around issues with three common features. Firstly, they were of limited scale, pertaining to sections rather than entire factories, and thus did not depend on broad mobilisations. Secondly, they were easily solved, with realistic, tangible strategies for their resolution. Finally, they were “reasonable” demands within the existing attitudes and values of participants – forming part of everyday changes in production. Above all, their key feature was that they contributed to *sectional* organisation, and implied changes in *sectional* culture, which calls into question the dysfunctional role that so-called “fragmentation” often plays in labour history.<sup>311</sup> In this organising phase, such de-centralisation appears to have been the result of activists' search for a sphere in which they could overcome the boundaries imposed by the rules of “conventional” trade unionism as discussed in Chapter Two. In this stage sectionalism represented the gradual piece-by-piece creation of collective unity, rather than its dissolution.

### *The development of new social practices*

Recruiting members, electing stewards and defining shared grievances were significant in terms of transforming the social life of the factory. However, they did not necessarily enable workers to engage successfully in collective action. The collective bargaining element of the post-war settlement encouraged union membership as a rational way of organising industrial relations, and sometimes the use of stewards as recruitment agents and dues collectors. It was perfectly possible for shops to elect representatives who saw their role along these lines, and for everyday life to remain much as it had in the immediate post-war period. Union activists often tell tales of this sort of representation. One Halewood steward recalled:

---

311 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 286; Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation', p. 186.

*When I got here, put on a section, I asked around for the steward. I eventually found out who he was but when I went up to him he told me that we couldn't talk about the union in the company's time. The management would object he said. So I thought, sod you. He asked me what union I was in and I said "not yours you bastard."<sup>312</sup>*

In this instance, the steward concerned saw his role as defined by the parameters set by Ford management. This conception of trade unionism saw the union as something external to the workplace, and the steward as essentially a section welfare officer. Discussion of union business took place outside the workplace rather than forming part of everyday life of the shop. Joe Harris, a Birmingham-born lineworker who had joined the CPGB in the 1930s, recalled another such character at Rover Solihull:

*He'd call a meeting, and he'd acquaint you with the nature of the problem and that, we'd debate it, discuss it, we would think of a rational way of resolving it, he'd send the shop steward in to see the foreman and the foreman used to bark at him and he'd come out and he'd say 'the foreman says this, and the foreman....', and I thought well, that weren't the way to do our business, really.<sup>313</sup>*

That Harris understood the power relations of the shop as reflective of the leadership of the steward is revealing of his attitude toward the nature of union militancy, which he saw primarily as a function of the quality of representation. Yet the foreman's confidence also reflects the absence of a strong collective culture amongst the workforce. Despite electing a steward, and recruiting members, the shop had not generated mutually-recognised customs and

---

312 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 80.

313 Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979.

practices in which both sides *expected* negotiation. Without the social practices necessary for workplace sanctions, workshops could remain collectively quite passive, even after high union densities had been established. For instance, at Longbridge in 1950, despite 70 per cent union membership and over 200 stewards, only five shops were active enough to require the convenor's attention more than once that year.<sup>314</sup>

Yet these were the beginnings of a process which *could* produce a “militant” shop culture: one in which the workers were prepared to act collectively in defence of their pay and conditions. Following the election of a representative, the discussion of grievances in shop meetings began a process of cultural change. Often located within the workshop and taking place during break times, section meetings enabled widespread participation and encouraged workers to discuss their grievances, helping to constitute them as a group. Democratic decision-making then converted collective interests into a consensus and impressed upon representatives a democratic mandate to be fulfilled, whilst implicitly promising group support for action. This constituted a mutual exchange of loyalty and obligation, representing a shared practice in which discussion was genuinely two-way, and where representatives were able to get a feel for members' thoughts. More than anything, shop meetings and personal contact with stewards were *the* crucial means by which shops came to agree on and maintain “custom and practice”; the informal and formal rules which governed shop-level industrial relations.

Although “custom and practice” implied historical origins, with the exception of some skill demarcation amongst craftworkers, the motor industry had relatively few “traditional” restrictive practices. Generally, unorganised car workers had been flexible, with most shops having few set rules to cover movement of labour or production changes. The practices that so infuriated managers in the

---

314 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/5, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 1947 to 1952.

1960s and 1970s almost all emerged in the 1950s as part of the process that created the shop steward system. Rather than “customs”, workers created new rights, derived from this organisational phase and going beyond the limited “external bargaining” bequeathed by the post-war settlement. One such right was the entitlement workers eventually claimed to negotiations over new piecework prices.

The emergence of this custom is illustrated in a letter by Ray Grundy, a steward at Longbridge. Grundy describes a dispute over piece rates in 1954, featuring workers on a truck assembly line. Having briefly worked on a new model under a temporary rate, members instructed their steward to pursue a permanent agreement. In reply, the rate-fixer submitted a list of prices equivalent to similar operations on an older model, which was rejected. The following day, the chief rate-fixer for the East Works observed the department but offered no more money. A discussion ensued in which steward L. Jeans argued that other departments enjoyed better rates. At this point, the departmental foreman Mr. Tynes lost his temper, shouting 'you are not to talk of people in other departments! Until I make another offer you don't exist!' The stewards then returned to work, reporting the incident to their shop committee, who passed a resolution condemning Tynes' attitude which they sent to the Production Manager. The production manager then called the two stewards in to offer an apology, forwarding the complaint to the works manager who 'said he was sorry it had happened also, assured us that Bro Jeans did exist and was recognised as S.S. [shop steward] by himself and everyone else'.<sup>315</sup> Subsequently, Grundy would note with great satisfaction how the workers had 'let the management know that we are all together and pretty quick to back our shop stewards up'.<sup>316</sup>

The truck assemblers were poised somewhere between two different concepts

---

315 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/4, Letter, Ray Grundy to Dick Etheridge, 23 March 1954.

316 Grundy to Etheridge, 23 March 1954.

of piecework. For management, since the new job was identical to the old one, it logically commanded the same price. Tynes' actions, initially offering an identical rate and becoming irritated at the need to barter, illustrate the uncertainty of piecework negotiation rights at this point. The workers were attempting to establish a new bargaining custom, whereby any change in model would bring negotiations in which they could press for equality with other sections and look to improve their living standards. The solidarity implied in "backing up" their shop stewards would be crucial to this transition, simultaneously diminishing the threat of victimisation and heightening the sense that workmates could be depended upon to support collective action. Events like this changed expectations on both sides, contributing to a shift in how industrial relations were conducted, and workers' rights more generally.

As custom and practice like this bubbled up from the workshops, factory organisations looked to generalise new rights across the factory. Writing for the Birmingham Trades Council Journal the following month, AEU Convenor and prominent local Communist Dick Etheridge affirmed the rights of workers both to check rate-fixers' timings and negotiate prices. Etheridge contradicted Tynes, saying that 'national agreements on piece work prices are so low that the correct floor to floor time very much favours the ratefixer... it is custom today to talk of "Austin standards" and to barter for what we consider a "fair price" at already established prices.'<sup>317</sup> That the group led by Ray Grundy had to be so forthright in asserting something others had already claimed is indicative of the partial development of such bargaining. Since these social processes were directed on a voluntary basis and "from below", changes occurred in uneven ways, and offer some explanation for the perpetuation of sectionalism that I will explore in more detail in Chapter Four.

---

317 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/4, Dick Etheridge, Column for the Birmingham Trades Council Journal, 1954.

These kinds of disputes illustrate the way in which communicative action could contribute to subtle changes in social practices and create new expectations. Workers joined unions and chose representatives in order to check piece rate timings for fairness. When they were dissatisfied with the rate, they challenged the rate-fixer, causing conflict, which reinforced group solidarity and shop strength, whilst gradually normalising the idea that rates and timings should be mutually agreed. As the new practice of bartering over piece rates promoted conflict and strengthened the section as a collectivity, it increased the chance of other new practices, like strikes and other sanctions, emerging. Finally, since the new practice of aggressive bartering was often effective, this shifted expectations from accurate timings to the idea that rates would be fair vis-a-vis other shops at Austin, installing the most aggressive militants as the pace setters for wages and gradually ingraining the idea that new tasks should mean a wage rise.

Much of this “custom and practice” never reached the level of formal factory agreement, taking the form of written or verbal agreements or just informal understandings. Crucially in terms of militant shop cultures, the actual form agreements took was usually less important than what the workers were prepared to do in terms of defending them. Since from management's perspective these “customs” were often secured under duress (as a result of sanctions or the threat of sanctions) and were therefore of questionable legitimacy, their calculations were often not whether contravening them was permitted, but rather how much disruption might result from doing so.<sup>318</sup>

Many of the most significant strikes in the 1950s and early 1960s are examples

---

<sup>318</sup> Management's response during the court of inquiry into the 1962 Dagenham dispute over redundancy and victimisation of union activists is an excellent example of this sort of attitude, see: D.T. Jack, Industrial Courts Act, 1919, *Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute between the Ford Motor Company, Limited, Dagenham and Members of the Trade Unions Represented on the Trade Union Side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee*, 1962.

of management attempting to ignore recently invented “custom and practice” and violating the workforce's new expectations. Ernie Stanton, an NUVB steward in the Dagenham assembly plant until his dismissal for union activities, describes the build-up to a large strike in 1962 as typical of this sort of behaviour. The company would remove workers or speed up the line without consultation, something that Stanton claimed 'ignored custom and practice', as it involved 'no use of procedure' and constituted 'unilateral management'.<sup>319</sup> This frequently resulted in spontaneous walkouts, based on the defence of existing “fair” conditions and their right to be consulted over labour load. Yet Ford management always maintained that they determined work effort unilaterally and what Stanton claimed as “rights” were in reality simply expectations the workforce were prepared to defend through collective action. This gap between management and worker understandings of “fairness” served to reinforce the idea that justice could only be obtained through militancy, rather than granted willingly by the company. Thus even management victories might leave new worker expectations in tact and link them to collective action, something that encouraged future resistance.

At the centre of all this activity we find a changing workplace culture. As expectations grew amongst employees, it became increasingly likely that they would make use of direct action in defence of their custom and practice, and with each successful usage such actions looked an increasingly reliable tool. For management, that reliability meant an increasing number of avenues in which its freedom to operate was likely be challenged, an expectation which lead managers, particularly at lower levels and during periods of high production demand, to respect ever greater numbers of “red lines”, which were crossed only at risk of conflict. However much managers might have hoped to effect the “real subjection” of the workforce (as discussed in my introduction), their capacity to do so was being eroded by the social power workers were

---

319 Ken Weller and Ernie Stanton, *What Happened at Fords* (Bromley: Solidarity, 1967), p. 14.



gradually creating. Consequently, social relations and workplace power were being re-shaped by worker activism, contributing to what Jim Phillips has called the 'erosion of social deference'.<sup>320</sup>

### *The closed shop*

As this capacity (social power) to effect change through cooperative action developed, it enabled workers to engage in more collective action and challenge management in new areas of working life, gradually creating the kind of shop cultures which later became familiar. Simultaneously, these new social practices and forms of representation also pushed new collective responsibilities, of which the closed shop is the best example, onto workers, reflecting of the changing values of shop-floor culture. The 100 per cent shop, as it was referred to by union activists, took a variety of forms, ranging from individual sections where full (or nearly full) membership had been brought about by voluntary recruitment, to the "pre-entry closed shop", in which management agreed to recruit only union members. In most cases 100 per cent shops came about as a result of normal recruitment, sometimes culminating in the refusal to continue working with non-unionists. Such developments might be the result of a concerted campaign, as was the case at Cowley in the late 1950s, where management eventually conceded that any shop above 85 per cent union density would be considered "closed".<sup>321</sup> Alternatively, at Longbridge there doesn't appear to have been any strategic campaign or formal agreement prior to declaring the factory 100 per cent union in 1964.<sup>322</sup>

In 1959, Dagenham had a strike over the issue: 'Two hundred and fifty men in the Door Department of the Ford Body Division have decided they will no longer

---

320 Jim Phillips, 'Class and Industrial Relations in Britain', p. 58.

321 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 8.

322 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/48, Austin Longbridge JSSC Annual General Meeting Minutes, January 1964.

work with a man who accepts all the benefits of Trade Union organisation but refuses to accept trade union responsibilities.<sup>323</sup> The man in question had initially joined the union then subsequently fallen behind on his subscriptions and been expelled. When offered a final chance to rejoin, he had refused, citing “conscientious objections” to membership.<sup>324</sup> The strikers' publicity material invoked a number of clear moral values illustrative of the workplace cultures that were becoming dominant in the industry by the early 1960s; that trade unionism provided benefits (fair pay and conditions) only on the basis of worker participation (financial and moral support), and that therefore the latter should be compulsory. As the highest expression of shop organisation, the idea of the 100 per cent shop embodied the social practices of trade unionism and its associated rights and responsibilities. As workshop-based collectivism became the norm and self-regarding individualism came to be seen as pathological, the dominant public discourse discussed in Chapter Two became almost inverted in many factory cultures.

### *The recreation of the habitus?*

These changes can be analysed in terms of our earlier discussion of Bourdieu. We recall that the *habitus* structures historical agency through a tendency to generate “reasonable”, “common-sense”, behaviours, whose limits are set historically and socially. Certain behaviours are encouraged because they anticipate an 'objective future'.<sup>325</sup> The *habitus* of a car worker in an unorganised shop, where management control tended towards domination, excluded direct collective action because the social practices and shared expectations of the workforce made it less likely such behaviour would succeed. Indeed in many cases up to the mid-1950s union activists only illustrated to their colleagues that

---

323 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/13, Austin Longbridge JSSC, “Demand That These Claims Be Met in Full!” (handbill), December 1954.

324 “Demand These Claims Be Met in Full”.

325 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, pp. 55–56.

militant union activism would get them the sack. Foremen and production managers were more inclined to impose changes or allow unpleasant conditions to persist because experience told them that such things would not usually be contested. Moreover, the absence of certain social practices - regular group meetings, steward election, group sanctions – promoted rationalities in which managerial prerogative was a given, but collective interests less tangible. Even with considerable grievances and in a comparatively benign economic and political context, shop-floor social relations promoted an economic rationality in which the purpose of work was to maximize personal earnings, and a social rationality in which pressure was sometimes put on others to help secure those earnings. At its most elaborate such rationality produced the practice already described by Vauxhall worker Peter Vigor, where bad timekeeping was punished through social pressure based on the moral value that “a slacker is a cuckoo, fouling the nest”.

Bourdieu argues that in most situations, the *habitus* tends to reproduce itself, structuring practices and behaviours, reinforcing expectations, rationalities and values. Yet the individual agency implied in its “infinite capacity for generating products” holds forth the promise of change.<sup>326</sup> Elements of everyday life both inside and outside the factory constituted a basis for such a transformation. Thus expectations of fair treatment, in terms of minimum standards for the physical environment, supervisory consideration and calculation of the wage-effort bargain, all tended toward a limited revision of shared practices, an effect that snowballed, finally producing the kind of shop-level democracy and conflictual industrial relations which became endemic in many factories in the 1960s.

Such developments were by no means universally popular. There were always individuals who rejected this form of trade unionism, but as the closed shop

---

326 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 55.

became more widespread new customs left anti-union workers with diminishing choices. Some, like Jim Barson (who later became NUVB convenor) at Cowley, were forced to join and later became active moderates.<sup>327</sup> Others were pushed out of the industry, as in one strike for a closed shop at Longbridge foundry in November 1960, where three “noners” (non-unionists) were targeted, one leaving and two succumbing and joining the union.<sup>328</sup> For most sceptics, as a new value system began to dominate, reluctant acceptance was the outcome. Ted Evans, a coach-builder from a conservative background, disapproved of unionisation at Rover’s Helen Street Body Shop: ‘I was never over keen. Even then there was the bullying tactics and I never liked those. I never liked being bullied into anything.’ Evans joined but later escaped by “getting on” and becoming a supervisor elsewhere in the company.<sup>329</sup>

The shared culture behind the closed shop was therefore more about establishing within a particular workgroup the passive or active acceptance of a set of values as common sense, rather than creating absolute uniformity. As shop cultures changed, the nature of everyday life changed with it, re-enforcing new social practices and cultural norms. Elements of factory life including regular shop meetings, reporting back from higher levels of the union, conflictual collective bargaining and organised disruption to production became more commonplace. As these practices became more habitual, their reliability as tools made their use more common-sensical. Workers found that their individual and collective agency gained them new capacities, encouraging accompanying expectations and demands which management found increasingly restrictive. Over time in place of the lowest level of group demands – fair timings, clean & safe shops, basic courtesy from supervisory staff – we find new minima – parity with the highest wages in the factory or the industry, worker-prescribed conditions and less powerful foremen.

---

327 Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism*, p. 14.

328 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/7, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 28 November 1960.

329 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/20, Ted Evans Interview, 12 November 1982.

Crucially, as my detailed study of these processes has shown, these new rights were advanced through the commitment of many hundreds of activists. They were neither the simple products of Fordism or the post-war settlement, nor the perpetuation of eternal labour movement traditions, and their appearance should not be taken for granted. Rather they represented the invention and propagation of new solidarities, social practices, collectivities and value systems. By disaggregating the different forms of power present in the workplace, separating the formal institutional role of the trade union from the power of the workers themselves, the process by which “organising” came about becomes clearer. Consequently, we are able to deepen our understanding of phenomena like “fragmentation” or “sectionalism” and better understand their influence on trade unionism in the decades that followed.

## **From shop to factory**

Detailed study of post-war trade unionism in the previous section has shown how collective organisation advanced through voluntary activity, on a section-by-section basis. Subsequently, having better understood the process by which collective cultures changed within particular departments, it will be useful to see how this behaviour became widespread across the industry. Considering first the influence of those external forces like employers, trade unions and governments for which many scholars claim a central role. With regard to governments, Chris Howell correctly sees the state as fundamental in shaping wider British industrial relations, but in the motor industry its influence seems to have been largely reactive. Significant state intervention in shop-floor bargaining only really began in the late 1950s and was more concerned with reducing unofficial strikes than securing social rights for car workers.<sup>330</sup> In the

---

330 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 36–37.

early 1960s, occasional visits by government troubleshooter Jack Scamp did put pressure on employers to rectify particular problems but usually these were aimed at appeasing already mobilised workforces. Scamp's inquiry into the Cowley Paint Shop in 1965, where large numbers of unofficial strikes drew the ministry's attention to health & safety problems in the factory, is one such example.<sup>331</sup>

Steven Tolliday has generally attributed the expansion of the steward system to a mixture of management reluctance to repress it or active encouragement of certain forms of organisation.<sup>332</sup> Steve Jefferys concurs, describing the growth of shop-floor bargaining at Longbridge as a process whereby worker activists filled 'spaces of omission and commission'.<sup>333</sup> However, although it is true that post-war employers facilitated organisation by dropping their inter-war policy of indiscriminate anti-unionism, and that they did come to accept many of their workers' new bargaining rights, given the high degree of voluntary activity (and the potential risk of victimisation) involved in organising, Tolliday too easily takes for granted the act of will involved in not just filling such spaces, but also shaping them. Workers repeatedly forced employers to concede new rights and "overfilled" positions offered to them: imbuing institutions with rights and meanings beyond those originally intended. As we have seen, employers' main contribution to shaping shop-floor bargaining was often merely regularising what some had already won through conflict.

In terms of the union movement itself, officials during this period had an ambivalent attitude to shop-floor bargaining. Certainly the leadership of the

---

331 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, Alan Thornett Collection [hereafter ATC], MSS.391/3/30, Report of the Motor Industry Joint Study Group Inquiry into Strikes at Cowley, 1964.

332 Steven Tolliday, 'Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organisation in the British Motor Industry 1939-69', in *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), pp. 108-47 (pp. 109, 135).

333 Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict', p. 58.

AEU were hostile to factory committees that regularly supported unofficial disputes. However, its leadership did offer some support for victimised shop stewards at Dagenham in both 1957 and 1962, despite being critical of the JSSC there. The TGWU and the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) also involved themselves in campaigns to defend shop stewards.<sup>334</sup> Further influence was imparted by local officials, who sometimes offered advice to nascent shop stewards' organisations. However, involvement in everyday activism was, as we noted above, extremely limited and provided little impetus for organising after the spate of post-war recognition agreements.<sup>335</sup>

One further external factor in the spread of shop-floor bargaining was the emergence of so-called "combine committees", unofficial organisations linking stewards in different factories. If the impact of the state, employers and trade unions took place after organisation and was often ambivalent, then national level steward organising was a direct and early means by which social practices were spread. On a national level, much of this activity was driven by CPGB stewards and their allies, who promoted these unofficial bodies, often in defiance of union officials.<sup>336</sup> Such a committee emerged immediately after the BMC merger in 1952, and was quickly dominated by Dick Etheridge and the Communist-led Longbridge stewards. Amongst the Rover workers one existed from the early 1950s, led by another Communist, Peter Nicholas.<sup>337</sup> Ford didn't acquire such a committee until much later on, but stewards at Dagenham made an important contribution to another industry-wide body, the Motor and Ancillary Trades Joint Shop Stewards Committee (MATJSSC). Whilst these organisations rarely led collective action, they did facilitate the sharing of information, with correspondence throughout the 1950s helping to fuel a culture

---

334 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 212; Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict', pp. 68–70.

335 Cronin, *Labour and Society*, p. 180.

336 Shirley Lerner and John Bescoby, 'Shop Steward Combine Committees in the British Engineering Industry', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 4 (1966), 154–64 (p. 157).

337 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/1/1, Rover Combine Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 23 March 1952.

of 'coercive comparison'.<sup>338</sup> In this way stewards were able to learn what kind of rights and conditions workers had acquired elsewhere and incorporate them into their own demands.

Having promoted them, CPGB activists used combine committees to further their policies. As Richard Stevens notes, the party won considerable influence in the industry, including the convenor's position at most of the largest factories.<sup>339</sup> Eddie Parry, a shop steward at Canley and briefly a CPGB official, argued that 'policies that we advocated at some stage later on were finally adopted by many of the industries and the trade unions'.<sup>340</sup> Yet, Parry also noted a tendency for car worker activists to shift the party toward policies more likely to be accepted by their co-workers:

*They [the CPGB] weren't too happy about the idea of a shorter working week to retain labour because they said that it was merely sharing the poverty, that we ought to resist the sack and at the same time fight politically for a policy of expansion... But we in industry thought that was a little bit airy-fairy because people on the shop floor could see immediately ... that there wasn't enough work to go round for everybody, and saw more logic in the idea of working a shorter working week to retain all the people.*<sup>341</sup>

The CPGB was able to promote the spread of shop-floor bargaining only in as much as it was one more institution through which factory activists operated. As with other external organisations, its influence was partial and contextual, with no single external force determining the ultimate rhythm of change.

---

338 Lerner and Bescoby, 'Shop Steward Combine Committees', p. 158; Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 142, 234.

339 Stevens, 'Cold War Politics', pp. 178–179.

340 Coventry History Centre, Oral History Collection, PA1662/2/169, Eddie Parry Interview, 1987.

341 Eddie Parry Interview, 1987.



Consequently the experiences of each factory and each workshop were far from uniform. As much as they were structured by external forces, their dependence on voluntary activism ensured that individual agency and contingent events created different experiences of organising at every factory. The following section examines that process at four locations, looking at how, in conjunction with particular events, each of these factors - sectional organising, the intervention of employers, governments, trade unions and combine committees – influenced the kind of trade union cultures that emerged at each location.

*William Morris' sweatshop: fighting an anti-union employer*

At Cowley, the main assembly plant for Morris Motors, Lord Nuffield (W.R. Morris) remained hostile to trade unionism even after 1945. As noted previously, Nuffield dismissed prominent union activists after the war and successfully prevented the union from gaining hegemony within the workforce until the late 1950s. Following the 1946 purge, trade unionism collapsed to a small core of AEU members, concentrated in the skilled areas of the factory, and relatively uninterested in the infant TGWU branch's efforts to organise the semi-skilled.<sup>342</sup>

When union density did expand in the second half of the 1950s it was largely the latter who provided the main impetus.<sup>343</sup> In this way Cowley refutes Jonathan Zeitlin's argument that shop steward organisation in the car industry was a process of transmitting craft union traditions to the mass of semi-skilled workers.<sup>344</sup> The AEU members at Cowley deliberately excluded their less skilled

---

342 Exell, 'Morris Motors in the 1940s', p. 111.

343 Exell, 'Morris Motors in the 1940s', p. 111; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 1–12.

344 Jonathan Zeitlin, 'The Emergence of Shop Steward Organization and Job Control in the British Car Industry: A Review Essay', *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), 119–37; Jonathan Zeitlin, 'Workplace Militancy: A Rejoinder', *History Workshop*, 16 (1983), 131–36.

counterparts from the factory organisation until the TGWU became too large to ignore. The most active TGWU stewards were representative of an autonomous semi-skilled trade unionism, independent of pre-war engineering traditions. Amongst their number were two track workers, Frank Horsman and Tony Bradley, and a paint sprayer, Bob Fryer. All three began working at the factory in the post-war period and none of them were craftsmen.<sup>345</sup> Thus, rather than shop-floor organisation reflecting the gradual imprint of traditional craft consciousness onto unorganised trackworkers, at Cowley it was the semi-skilled who began to remake the class culture of the plant. As such, the development of trade unionism there confirms the argument made in the first section of this chapter, that post-war organising involved the generation of new solidarities rather than the re-charging of older traditions.

This cultural remaking largely took place in the wake of the 1956 strike against redundancy. The previous year the Eden government had announced a credit squeeze, causing domestic car sales to fall.<sup>346</sup> By the Spring, the MATJSSC was agitating for action to defend jobs, organising a mass lobby of parliament in March which demanded Exell no redundancies, no short-time and trade with the Eastern Bloc.<sup>347</sup> By the time BMC gave 48 hours notice of its own 6,000 redundancies (700 at Cowley), the official unions had already signalled their support for strike action.<sup>348</sup> The resultant walkout was well-supported at several factories, and official recognition brought solidarity action from Pressed Steel - cutting off body supplies - and from the docks, where cars piled up at Liverpool and other ports.<sup>349</sup> At the assembly plant, it demonstrated the weakness of the union. Whilst at Nuffield Metal Products a mass meeting decided to walk out

---

345 Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism*, p. 4.

346 Jon Murden, "All Those in Favour Say Aye" : Responses to Redundancy in the British Motor Industry, 1956', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 17 (2004), 75–110 (pp. 88–89).

347 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, p. 295.

348 Murden, 'All Those in Favour Say Aye', pp. 96–97.

349 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, pp. 297–298.

before the strike had officially begun, at Morris Motors Tony Bradley had to persuade workers to leave through an impromptu address delivered from a works canteen table.<sup>350</sup> In total the stewards managed to persuade just one in seven workers to strike.

Despite initial problems, with the help of a “blacking” campaign (a boycott of materials from, or destined for, the strike-bound workplace), mass pickets began to have an effect, and as the strike grew day-by-day, it was further boosted by a silent vigil on 27 June:

*We all lined the road and we all held our trade union cards up, and we didn't say a word, as all the scabs and the blacklegs came out ... we just held our heads in shame that these people had sold their own colleagues, their own friends with wives and families, down the river'.<sup>351</sup>*

Les Gurl, an AEU steward, later recalled that: 'Men got off their bikes, went up to the line to speak to people that they knew and promised that when they came back [from holiday], they would not go into work.'<sup>352</sup> By the time the holiday shut-down was over the strike had been settled, with the company agreeing to two weeks redundancy pay and consultation over any future cuts.<sup>353</sup>

The effects of this partial victory were dramatic, and steward Bob Fryer found that in the Paint Shop where he worked, 'in many cases it was not so hard to get them in... they were so ashamed of the role they had played.'<sup>354</sup> The way in which the 1956 strike transformed the situation demonstrates the often

---

350 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 6.

351 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 65.

352 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, p. 298.

353 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, p. 298.

354 Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism*, p. 14.

contingent nature of union development. Just as particular arguments over piece rates or discipline could serve as a rallying point for sectional organising, union officials' support from their authoritative public platform helped convince a substantial minority that action was both possible and legitimate. This helped a militant minority to spread their message to new parts of the factory, with the size and visibility of the dispute meaning workers could use new social practices – mass meetings, mass pickets, a silent vigil – to make a symbolic demonstration of a union that had heretofore only existed as individual recruiters. It reproduced the solidarity implied by those union cards in physical form, forcing waverers to confront it, provoking a moral response and stating its own moral values: that workers owed their solidarity to the union, and that strikebreakers were scabs. All of these effects were reinforced by the partial victory the strikers achieved, demonstrating the efficacy of trade unionism and dispelling many excuses for not participating.

As well as the transformative capacity of contingent events, the 1956 strike demonstrated the union's lack of real power. Six thousand workers crossed the picket lines, reflective of the weak trade union culture at shop level. Despite official backing for the strike, the stewards were unable to transmit information in conventional ways to the majority of workers, and Tony Bradley had to risk disciplinary action through a spontaneous meeting, in order to communicate with the workers in his department. After the 1956 strike, it was the need to create greater organisational capacity which led activists to embark upon a campaign for 100 per cent trade unionism, with activists using the spaces opened up by the strike to re-make the culture of the factory from the bottom up.

Within three years, the unions at Cowley had expanded from one in four workers to two in three, with the TGWU up to three thousand members and ninety stewards. By the time the company attempted to sack convenor Frank

Horsman, a Labour Party member, in 1959, the union organisation's capacity for mobilisation had become far more developed.<sup>355</sup> Whilst three years earlier, even with official support, it had taken an improvised mass meeting to persuade a fraction of the workforce to walk out, this time the reflexes of many of the sections were better honed. Tim O'Sullivan, a worker in the 'E' Block Paint Shop describes how the strike started; 'As soon as Tommy [Swotton, his steward] heard that Frank Horsman had been sacked he got his section stopped. He came over to see my steward and they got my section stopped. He was not interested in anything else, a Convenor had been sacked and there was nothing else to do.'<sup>356</sup> That night activists in the plant met at Bob Fryer's house to plot extending the strike. The following day they decided to enter the plant the next day and instruct the workers to walk out and form a picket line. Confronted by a foreman, Fryer's new confidence was clear, "'Who told you to withdraw your labour?" He said. I said, "Never mind who told me, you have dismissed our Convenor and we are walking out."<sup>357</sup> All the production lines were stopped and Frank Cousins, the left-wing General Secretary of the TGWU, declared the strike official.<sup>358</sup>

1959 thus reversed the social process of 1956, with official recognition following in the wake of successful factory organising. This time, stewards and activists had reacted rapidly because they could work through the existing social connections built between members and stewards, through a mixture of factory gate and lunch-hour shop meetings, as well as short strikes and other forms of industrial action. Although the immediate walkout by 350 Paint Shop workers on July 15 was spontaneous, in the sense that it was an unplanned reaction, their response was only possible because of a historical process, in which the leadership and solidarity of that section had developed over a number of years.

---

355 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p.1; From *Militancy to Marxism*, p. 9.

356 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 10.

357 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 10.

358 Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 10–11.

Immediate unofficial strike action had become one of the “reasonable” actions available to the workforce, in stark contrast to the muted responses to earlier victimisations.<sup>359</sup> As a result of the dispute, the TGWU eventually reached a strange compromise with BMC and Pressed Steel (also closed by the strike), that Horsman would be employed at the latter but with full recognition of his existing service (seniority) rights.<sup>360</sup>

After the Horsman strike, in a testament to way in which activism could reshape workplace power relations, Cowley's stewards would not be attacked head on by management again until 1974. In 1963 BMC granted facility time to convenors, effectively recognising the shop stewards' movement and in 1966 a factory closed shop was agreed,<sup>361</sup> marking the culmination of a stop-start factory-wide process. Between 1945 and 1956, a non-union *habitus* largely reproduced itself, as workers in most shops continued to be largely atomised. Utilising the legitimacy of an official strike, the factory union organisation was able to introduce new social practices and values, which in turn were sustained in everyday life by filling the spaces the strike had created with ongoing shop organisation. By 1959, we find workers in a very different *habitus* (the details of which will be explored further in Chapter Four), where the social practices of trade unionism were well entrenched, with shop meetings and unofficial wildcat strikes the common sense reaction to an attack on the union organisation. There had been a clear shift in collective expectations: whilst Len Barker was fired without meaningful protest in 1946, defence of the convenor was seen in 1959 as obvious and necessary. Finally with the agreements concluded in the 1960s, rights were generalised across the plant, partially overcoming the unevenness that marked these developments. Thus just as at sectional level, workers took the spaces offered to them, often “by omission”, and “over-filled” them with their new social practices and values, eventually forcing

---

359 Exell, 'Morris Motors in the 1940s', p. 108.

360 Thornett, *Militant years*, pp. 11-12.

361 Thornett, *Militant years*, p. 30, 36.

management into generalising what they had won – conceding new rights “by commission”.

### *Speed-up! Fighting the foreman at Ford*

This pattern of overcoming management hostility through the gradual development of shop-floor organisations was repeated in other firms, but elsewhere, sometimes even in neighbouring factories, experiences varied. At two connected Dagenham firms, Briggs and Ford, industrial relations developed substantial differences. Workers in the former were ostensibly granted recognition for their shop stewards following a court of inquiry in 1941, whilst Ford resisted union recognition until April 1944, when after several disputes they finally agreed to negotiate with national union officials.<sup>362</sup>

Although Tolliday argues that trade unionism came to Ford via the 1952 Briggs merger,<sup>363</sup> the union organisations at both factories had a lot in common in the mid-1940s. Both had an active CPGB branch, both organisations were to some degree precarious and both plants lost militants (particularly Communists) during the 1947 fuel crisis shut-down.<sup>364</sup> The period between 1946 and 1952 was key to the divergent development of the two organisations. Despite both companies trying to limit the extent of job control exercised by their workforce, the Briggs stewards found it easier to make advances prior to the merger. Briggs' piecework arrangements allowed stewards to build up strength department-by-department, and to use shop meetings to discuss, vote and negotiate on wages, hours and working practices.<sup>365</sup> As noted above, under

---

362 Henry Friedman and Sander Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict : Lessons from Ford* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 23–24.

363 Tolliday, 'Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organisation in the British Motor Industry 1939-69', p. 130.

364 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 57.

365 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 26.

MDW Ford set wage rates in national negotiations, and jealously guarded managerial prerogatives over work effort. Thus, although Ford did have 38 strikes and go-slows between 1946 and 1949,<sup>366</sup> these rarely met with much success and organisation within workshops remained largely fractured.<sup>367</sup>

By 1952, when Ford took over Briggs, the JSSC there was probably the most developed in the motor industry. It was 'highly politicised, had its own offices, raised its own finance, employed a full-time secretary, issued its own propaganda and published its own newspaper – *The Voice of Briggs Workers*'.<sup>368</sup> The stewards organisation ensured a regular flow of information with JSSC meetings every Wednesday and "report back" shop meetings every Thursday, in which workers ratified decisions taken the previous day.<sup>369</sup> Through tight organisation workers secured substantial control over job standards, labour mobility, over-time, and relief times.<sup>370</sup> After the takeover, the Briggs stewards attempted to retain their practices and conditions and to create a unified JSSC, whilst management set about importing Ford conditions to Briggs. Despite resistance, formal agreement was reached in 1955, as officials signed an agreement 'to achieve efficient production by all reasonable means', explicitly excluding stewards from negotiating working practices and admitting that 'deliberate action by an employee to retard or restrict production methods for achieving efficiency shall be grounds for dismissal.'<sup>371</sup>

Whatever its wording, the high level of organisation at Briggs meant the agreement 'proved to be only a temporary truce document, and did nothing to

---

366 Lyddon, 'The Car Industry, 1945-79', p. 194.

367 Steven Tolliday, 'Ford and "Fordism" in Postwar Britain: Enterprise Management and the Control of Labour, 1937-1987', in *The Power to Manage?: Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative Historical Perspective*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 81–114 (p. 87).

368 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, pp. 425–426.

369 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 58.

370 Tolliday, 'Ford and "Fordism"', p. 88.

371 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 27.



lessen the day-to-day conflict, or reduce the number of stoppages'.<sup>372</sup> Consequently, in 1957 Ford renewed its offensive against the Dagenham JSSC, dismissing steward John McLoughlin over an attempt to call an unauthorised meeting. The strike to secure his reinstatement was declared official by the AEU, who eventually ended the strike in exchange for a court of inquiry (see Chapter Two).<sup>373</sup> Conflict continued after the opening of the new assembly plant in 1958. Despite Ford trying to instil strict discipline, with substantial numbers of former Briggs workers accustomed to more consultative arrangements the plant's teething problems allowed more militant stewards to reassert old practices.<sup>374</sup> Arguments ensued about stewards and meeting rights, health and safety, manning and overtime, and the new plant became the most strike-prone part of Dagenham.<sup>375</sup>

Subsequently, Ford workers gained considerable notoriety, with even minor disputes becoming national news. In 1961, an argument over a national agreement to remove the afternoon tea break prompted Liberal leader Jo Grimond to characterise Dagenham as a place 'where you cannot even wheel round a tea trolley without having a row'.<sup>376</sup> The dispute itself was an unofficial go slow, where workers protested the loss of their break by organised malingering; 'instead of one or two of each section collecting a dozen or so cups of tea from the tea trolleys for their mates, each man lined up individually. Each wanted change from a £1 or 10/- note for a 3d. cup of tea.'<sup>377</sup> For Brian Jeffreys, a worker in the Engine Plant, the dispute arose because he and his co-workers 'refused to submit to the union officials and the Company interfering with what we regarded as our religious freedom.'<sup>378</sup> Jeffreys' facetious remark

---

372 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 59.

373 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 59–61.

374 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 59.

375 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 62.

376 'Workers Should Be on Firms' Boards, Says Mr. Grimond', *The Times*, 25 September 1961, p. 8.

377 'News from Ford's', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, May 1962, 3–4.

378 Brian Jeffreys, 'Too Old at 50', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, July 1966, 20–22.

about “religious freedom” masked the reality, that such small victories forged organisations and cultures. For one worker the tea break was the only part of the day that wasn't dehumanising; 'For 10 minutes the workers became ordinary human beings, drinking tea, eating sandwiches, smiling, talking, reading the morning paper.'<sup>379</sup> Where the workforce was able to build sufficient social power to contest change, the seemingly trivial could become essential freedoms and inviolable rights. Where management aspired to total control of the production line, these kinds of issues looked like fragments of democracy in an essentially autocratic system.

However, the men who had signed the 1961 deal disputed the need for this form of organisation, and wanted to restrict workers' capacity to cause such disruption. AEU leader Bill Carron argued that:

*The old need for unbridled militancy rapidly diminished with the reduction of our immediate major social and industrial problems. One still finds pockets of militancy which are inspired by motives that cannot be accepted as being based purely on trade union principles.*<sup>380</sup>

The JSSC faced increasing pressure to conform to normative standards of trade unionism and in 1962 the militants in the assembly plant found themselves fighting management attacks on their organisation. On 17 October Bill Francis, chair of the stewards' committee, was sacked for holding an unauthorised meeting. The stewards called for a strike, with convenor Kevin Halpin successfully persuading members that impromptu meetings were a vital social right, as without them 'our members couldn't respond to changes and would have to work them'.<sup>381</sup> Works managers were under constant pressure to

---

379 'I Work at Fords', p. 8.

380 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, p. 5.

381 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 69.

raise output, and the mix of models meant that changes to line speed and working practices were relatively common. If these were problematic, for management and union officials the ideal was that workers would accept new arrangements, whilst their steward took the case through Ford's lengthy grievance procedure, an idea which strongly echoed the understanding of industrial relations characteristic of the mainstream commentary discussed in Chapter Two.

As in the case of the McLoughlin sacking, the JSSC sought union assistance for the dispute, hoping that official status would help them spread the strike.<sup>382</sup> Strong support for Francis (only 6 voted against the strike in the assembly plant) meant that a walkout was inevitable, and whilst official recognition exposed the union to criticism and liability for strike pay, it also handed them control of negotiations. Whilst at a mass meeting on 23 October a full-time official backed continuation of the strike to a mass meeting of 6,000 workers, two days later trade union officials, with assurances from management that Francis' case would be looked at, advocated a return to work and convinced the senior stewards to do likewise at a mass meeting.<sup>383</sup>

With the strike over, Ford immediately reneged on their agreement with the union, refusing to take back large numbers of workers. Those workers they did allow to return were confronted by speed-ups and new job allocations, adding to their sense of disorientation.<sup>384</sup> The unions set about negotiating the return of 700 workers still outside the gate, with the company eventually settling on 17 workers they did not want back. Negotiations dragged on into November, with the Communist Party attempting to persuade the victimised stewards (almost all party members) to continue pressing the union for official support. Lobbying a meeting on 14 November, activists seem to have become increasingly

---

382 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, pp. 19–20.

383 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, p. 19.

384 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, p. 21.

divided, with many bitter at the CPGB's role: 'As Claude Berridge [local official and CPGB member] arrived a half-hearted cheer went up from the loyal Party members. This was met by an even louder jeer of "Fuck him, he's come to sell us out, same as all the others."<sup>385</sup> As the officials left, the protesting workers demanded to know when the strike would start. NUVB General Secretary Alf Roberts bluntly replied, 'you people got yourselves into this mess. It's in our hands now. We'll decide what's best for our members in Dagenham.'<sup>386</sup>

Eventually the unions agreed to call off strike action in exchange for a further court of inquiry, this time under economist D.T. Jack, which again concluded that the excessive autonomy of the Dagenham JSSC was inappropriate, and defended management's right to dismiss workers.<sup>387</sup> Significantly, Les Kealey, a full-time TGWU official on the National Joint Negotiating Committee [NJNC<sup>388</sup>], denounced the Dagenham militants:

*The Joint Shop Stewards' Committee ... have their own offices, and churn out anti-Company literature daily. Their actions make it impossible to build up the sort of relationships with the Ford Motor Company which will enable the unions to obtain for their members the best wages and working conditions.*<sup>389</sup>

Six months had now passed and the 17 stayed sacked, with some bitterly denouncing the Communist Party for its role, and leaving the party.<sup>390</sup>

In the aftermath of the strike, Ford returned to "external bargaining", restoring

---

385 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, p. 22.

386 Weller and Stanton, *What Happened at Fords*, p. 23.

387 'The Right to Dismiss', *The Times*, 11 April 1963, p. 13.

388 The national negotiating forum for Ford UK, comprised of trade union officials and company managers.

389 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 63.

390 Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 71.

managerial prerogative over everything that happened in the plant. Subsequently, a 30 per cent speed-up was imposed and workers were soon complaining of management bullying.<sup>391</sup> Although the victimised stewards were just 5 per cent of the JSSC and less than one third of the Communist Party factory branch, the effect of the rout was to generate a climate of fear. According to Henry Friedman, convenor of the River Plant, these conditions persisted until the late 1960s:

*Shop stewards were not allowed to leave their job unless they had written permission in the form of a signed pass by the Supervisors, stating the time of their departure, the reason for leaving their job and the time of their return... These developments, interspersed by a series of minor defeats... created a feeling of ineffectiveness, increasing powerlessness and growing resentment amongst the rank-and-file leadership.*<sup>392</sup>

The 1962 defeat thus left a considerable historical imprint on shop-floor life. Even though strike levels began to rise again a few years later, an air of defeat hung over the organisation and a series of “sweetheart deals” on the NJNC saw wage levels drop so far that Ford struggled to hire new workers.<sup>393</sup>

The experience of Dagenham's workers shows the importance of militant shop cultures and their precariousness even into the 1960s. Although wartime mobilisation by Ford workers won formal recognition for their union, their organisational weakness allowed management to continue exercising unilateral control over life within the factory. Later the former pieceworkers from the body plant were able to bring their social practices and workers' rights with them into other parts of the factory, prompting a decade of conflict in which workers

---

391 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 63.

392 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 128.

393 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 65.

developed very different expectations around line speed, labour load and working conditions. Finally, the effects of the company's repression of those social practices in 1962 illustrates both their importance in terms of the workers' collective social power and their potential fragility. New workplace rights emerged through voluntary activism and often remained dependent upon it being ongoing. Not only was shop-floor bargaining not inevitable; without constant vigilance some firms were not above withdrawing it, a fact reflected in the inconsistent control that Ford workers managed to win over line speed.<sup>394</sup>

### *The Coventry Klondyke: defending worker autonomy*

The three largest motor firms – Morris, Ford and Austin - mirrored each other in their reluctance to admit shop-floor bargaining. One large firm, however, initially encouraged it. With the backing of the government as a so-called “national champion”<sup>395</sup>, after the war Standard immediately launched a new model – The Vanguard – and adopted a high output strategy.<sup>396</sup> To obtain this rise in production, Standard organised piecework by “gang”, leaving gang leaders and shop stewards to organise production. These gangs earned such large bonuses that the factory earned the reputation - even in the prosperous city of Coventry - as “The Klondyke”.<sup>397</sup>

The company used stewards to maintain output levels, refraining from challenging their credentials in the same way as elsewhere.<sup>398</sup> With the gang bonus giving workers a collective financial interest in continuous production,

---

394 Tolliday, ‘Ford and “Fordism”’, p. 91.

395 Jim Tomlinson, ‘The Government and the Car Industry, 1945-70’, *Journal of Transport History*, 20 (1999), 17–29 (pp. 21–23).

396 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 1–19.

397 Tolliday, ‘High Tide and after’, p. 208.

398 Tolliday, ‘High Tide and after’, pp. 209–210.

heavy-handed supervision was deemed unnecessary, as workers would look to increase productivity wherever possible.<sup>399</sup> Workers were thus allowed to elect their own representatives, who in turn could ensure the fairness of piece rates. In this situation, the general tendency under piecework for conflict to be directed away from management and toward intra-group discipline became exaggerated. Eddie McGarry, a shop steward at that time and later a moderate factory convenor, hailed the disciplinary effects of the the gang system as 'the best foremen we ever had'.<sup>400</sup>

When placed in the context of the engineering industry's particular history in Coventry, the appeal of such a combination of high wages and worker "productivism" is easy to see. The West Midlands, far more than Dagenham and Oxford, was a place in which engineering work formed part of the regional identity. Historian Paul Thompson wrote that for Coventry people engineering skills were 'central to the historical tradition of their city'.<sup>401</sup> Only here, with the multitude of car firms and suppliers could it be argued that car workers found themselves part of a tradition of work that was pervasive across their community. One Coventry toolmaker expressed this sentiment as follows: 'you'd get a man on a machine, he could be a skilled, semi-skilled worker ... his dexterity of doing the job shone through, like a juggler... and it went in families in Coventry... You couldn't take somebody out of a farmyard'.<sup>402</sup> Attitudes like this pervade semi-skilled machinist Dwight Rayton's eulogy to the gang system in the 1940s, in which he declared that outside Coventry 'try as they might they could not teach "the locals" quickly enough to be worthwhile'.<sup>403</sup> This culture fed into appreciation for Standard's work organisation and respect for its good

---

399 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 214.

400 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 211.

401 Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men : Factory Culture and Pride in Work Skills among Coventry Car Workers', *Social History [London]*, 13 (1988), 45–69 (p. 50).

402 Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men', p. 55.

403 Dwight Rayton, *Shop Floor Democracy in Action : A Personal Account of the Coventry Gang System* (Leeds: Industrial Common Ownership Movement, 1972), p. 13.

work. As one machinist described it, 'the discipline was built into the system by the men themselves, not by the authorities or the management. It was self-pride that made you get it right.. Nobody wanted to look like a silly arse by scrapping the whole lot.'<sup>404</sup>

Not everyone was so enamoured with the system, Alf Brogan saw at Standard a tendency to delimit autonomy and self-respect by gang; 'although it was union, it was all different empires. It weren't like I always thought the union was, you know, all brothers together.'<sup>405</sup> Moreover, under gang piecework arrangements, earnings depended not just on working fast, but also on eliminating excess labour. This meant that co-workers not only pressed for higher work effort but also that gangs could be resistant to new hiring or even encourage redundancy and outsourcing.<sup>406</sup> According to J.Harris, a toolmaker, rather than resistance, redundancy prompted intense competition to avoid the boot; 'if you thought your case was strong enough for not being redundant, and the fellow next to you, you could substitute him.'<sup>407</sup> Stewards and foremen would agree on lists of redundancies, sometimes including any workers they found troublesome; 'He [the foreman] would make his initial selection, and then there would be all sorts of trouble and ejections, until, finally, after a lot of discussion and argy-bargy, they would probably cut it down to 15, and he would... probably get rid of the trouble-makers.'<sup>408</sup> Harris' comments mirror one description of lay-offs in 1950, in which stewards responded to a management request for redundancies by secretly drawing up a list on their behalf.<sup>409</sup> Shop steward rights, conceded from above, could compromise the autonomy of representatives and lead to them being held responsible for unpopular decisions. The gang system also seems to have encouraged workers to share

---

404 Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men', p. 63.

405 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 211.

406 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 212.

407 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/1, J. Harris Interview, Undated.

408 J. Harris Interview, Undated.

409 Seymour Melman, *Decision-Making and Productivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 49.



a productivist rationality, helping shape a culture of mutual self-discipline.

However, Standard's co-operative industrial relations were not to last. By 1953, production management had decided they had ceded excessive autonomy to representatives, and that management needed to regain control over discipline and wage levels. New restrictions were placed on stewards, who now needed management permission to leave their section. That December, in order to establish the principle that management had 'the right to manage its own factories', stewards Gordon Wright and Danny Morgan were sacked for breaking the new rules.<sup>410</sup> In the department they represented, 200 workers struck in support, and when management attempted to discipline two other stewards for the same offence, three Standard factories struck in sympathy.<sup>411</sup> The unions made the strike official and when dockers in the TGWU threatened to black their exports, Standard management backed down and reinstated the men.<sup>412</sup>

Even at Standard, the clearest case of management having created rights by “commission”, workers found it necessary to defend their autonomy. The reaction to attacks on their custom and practice implies that a process of “over-filling” these spaces had taken place, and the same shop cultures that produced conflict elsewhere could still be found. In part, such behaviour could be attributed to the wider traditions of the Coventry labour movement, but looking at Standard more closely, we can also see that whilst their version of “co-management” did promote productivist rationalities and steward discipline, it also encouraged its workforce to think of large areas of job control as part of their rights.

What was happening under the gang system was not a case of electing crypto-

---

410 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, pp. 335–336.

411 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, p. 335.

412 Frow and Frow, *Engineering Struggles*, p. 336.

personnel managers, but workers within shops being allowed space to negotiate bonuses, establish output norms and consult over redundancies. It gave stewards and workers a sphere in which to decide what was “fair” and to develop a sense that discussion and representation was normal. Although there was a tendency for some to see stewards as dominating the workforce in the earlier period - as 'another layer of management' in the words of one worker<sup>413</sup> - such tendencies were overcome by the precarity of their position, working alongside their constituents and remaining in post only so long as their fellow workers declined to force them out. The refusal by stewards in 1956 to provide management with redundancy lists (as they had done previously), indicates how such relationships forced stewards to recognise the dual nature of their role.<sup>414</sup> This connection to the work process and the understanding it brought of the potential pitfalls of joint institutions gave some Standard stewards agency within a process which otherwise might have separated them from their co-workers.

Although it generated consent for production, gang piecework also made consensual change part of factory life. This form of “co-management” could actively create the social practices and “custom and practice” which constituted a collective factory culture, ready to be utilised when management decided on a more confrontational form of industrial relations. Two years later, during the 1956 down-turn, management's attempt to dismiss 2,500 workers, including substantial numbers of stewards, resulted in a major strike, which marked a further deterioration in Standard's previously peaceful industrial relations.<sup>415</sup> The solidarity displayed on that occasion showed the strength of the Standard stewards movement, reflecting the agency that workers had, even within “commissioned” spaces.

---

413 Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men', p. 64.

414 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 199.

415 Andrew L. Friedman, *Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 213.

### *Vauxhall: The cabbage patch?*

In all the cases above, despite their differing locales, management styles and historical development, eventually industrial relations converged on a number of almost universal features. In most factories, mobilisation revolved around the shop steward system, which was built on social practices and cultural values that existed most strongly within sections, but with increasing reliability at factory level. By the mid-1960s, in most cases these features culminated in 100 per cent trade unionism, but at one firm this was not case, illustrating a key claim in this chapter, that such organisation was not inevitable and depended on worker activism to come into existence. Vauxhall remained largely “strike-free” into the 1960s, with substantial numbers of “noners” and negotiations which largely bypassed shop organisation.<sup>416</sup> Their Luton factory even earned the sobriquet “the cabbage patch” in some quarters, a reference to its placid workforce and their supposed rural origins.<sup>417</sup>

Some of this may have derived from an innovative industrial relations regime. Vauxhall instituted a permanent committee of worker representatives, the Management Advisory Committee [MAC], consisting of 20 delegates elected by secret ballot once every three years. Some accounts emphasise the extent to which the MAC was able to resolve grievances quickly. According to Jack West, a foreman:

*Every month they had a meeting. “What's the trouble?” “Not enough sugar in the tea,” or any little thing was bought up and thrashed out.*

---

<sup>416</sup> Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin, ‘Shop-Floor Bargaining, Contract Unionism and Job Control: An Anglo-American Comparison’, in *The Automobile Industry and its Workers : Between Fordism and Flexibility*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), pp. 99–120 (p. 104); Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 194, 211.

<sup>417</sup> Spartacus, ‘The Vauxhall Struggle’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, September 1967, 3–6.

*And that was it, there was no messing about then. And of course he was trouble free of strikes, because everything was... scotched off beforehand.*<sup>418</sup>

In this respect the MAC took on many of the “pastoral” functions which were the responsibility of shop stewards in other plants – ironing out pay anomalies, responding to complaints about working conditions and dealing with health and safety issues, preventing their use as a way of building up support for the union within the workshop.

However, the MAC's effectiveness in this regard can be overstated. Whilst an effective in-house grievance procedure may have stymied some initial attempts to create more militant shop-floor cultures, it should be noted that consultation at Vauxhall went no further than it theoretically did at Ford. Management retained control over the work process, transfers and redundancy. The issues dealt with by the MAC were also similar to those discussed by Joint Production Committees at Longbridge and Cowley.<sup>419</sup> What marked out the Vauxhall regime was the ability to perpetuate co-operative workshop cultures and industrial relations rationalities longer than their competitors, through a mixture of subtle repression, astute concession and a fortunate change of direction over wage structure, all of which worked against the development of adversarial industrial relations at sectional level.

Up to 1956 Vauxhall had operated with a group piece rate bonus, which produced similar intra-group discipline and productivist rationalities to those at Standard.<sup>420</sup> Then, just as workers at other factories began to use piecework to their advantage, Vauxhall introduced a company-wide hourly payment system

---

418 LHA, X819/11/9, Jack West Interview, January 1981.

419 For more details on the nature of joint production committees, see: James Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens: Engineering Democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994).

420 LHA, X819/11/2, Harold Horne Interview, July 1978.

(MDW) which made it harder to organise over pay. Meanwhile, the kinds of disputes over shop conditions that had stimulated organisation at Ford were dealt with through the MAC, whose members, released from work to participate and earning the average wage (including overtime),<sup>421</sup> seem to have become increasingly distant from their fellow workers, many of whom began to complain about poor representation.<sup>422</sup> Following a boycott in the early 1960s, turnout for MAC elections dropped to a tiny 5 per cent. Meanwhile, union membership levels fell to just 53 per cent, as both MAC members and AEU officials collaborated in bypassing stewards and excluding workers from decision-making.<sup>423</sup>

On top of this unpromising *habitus*, Vauxhall was assiduous in discouraging shop-level organising. Those stewards that did come forward were tightly controlled, and “troublemakers” were often moved around the factory, preventing them from forming cohesive workgroups.<sup>424</sup> In 1967 a Vauxhall militant complained that the company was thwarting his efforts to organise by unilaterally moving him around the plant:

*I personally have worked in nearly every building in the Luton plant. There have been no doubts whatsoever that this has contributed to the gradual and systematic breaking up of the pressure groups within our more militant departments.*<sup>425</sup>

In many other factories workers developed social practices to prevent management employing similar tactics, restricting the extent to which workers

---

421 Holden, 'Think of Me Simply as the Skipper', pp. 26–27; Ken Weller, *Truth about Vauxhall* (Whipsnade: Morse, 1962), p. 9; Lyddon, 'The Car Industry, 1945-79', p. 197.

422 Weller, *Truth about Vauxhall*, p. 8.

423 Weller, *Truth about Vauxhall*, p. 10.

424 Weller, *Truth about Vauxhall*, p. 5.

425 Spartacus, 'The Vauxhall Struggle', p. 3.

could be unilaterally moved between sections.<sup>426</sup> At Vauxhall, stewards struggled to build a solid base in a shop before being moved, and even if they succeeded, management restrictions on leaving their post or holding meetings on site made organising yet more difficult, particularly when union-minded workers with grievances were offered a legitimate outlet via the MAC.

In addition to complaining about management and “sell-out” committee members, militants linked to *Solidarity* were scathing of many of their co-workers. One shop steward recalled a dispute in which a large puddle appeared in one workshop. Workers continued to paddle around in it, 'whinging', for an hour and a half. When their shop steward arrived and finally got it cleared up one turned round and told him, 'about bloody time!' This, claimed the steward, was representative of the culture at Vauxhall – 'shop stewards are often blamed for not doing their jobs by workers who will not lift a finger to help themselves'.<sup>427</sup> In this militant's eyes where workers in other factories would protest, at Vauxhall they continued work, and reacted to an active steward as if he were a hired official providing a service. In addition to the lack of control over movement of labour, union activists despaired of the level of trade union consciousness in the factory.<sup>428</sup> Even as late as 1969, with the MAC no more, some activists claimed that these sorts of clientelist attitudes continued, with the JSSC with the Senior Stewards functioning largely as a transmission belt for agreements worked out between officials and management, and an unofficial rank-and-file group - “Vauxfam” - having to mobilise workers to vote against the 1969 wage agreement.<sup>429</sup>

Deciphering whether it was the orientations workers brought to the factory that

---

426 Towards the end of the 1960s these agreements were often formalised, for an example see: ATC, MSS.391/3/31/9, Movement of Labour Agreements Ballot, 1969.

427 'Inside Vauxhall', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, June 1969, 21–22.

428 Spartacus, 'The Vauxhall Struggle', pp. 3–4.

429 'Vauxhall Follow-Up', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, August 1970, pp. 13–15.

contributed to industrial peace or whether attitudes were shaped by managerial institutions is difficult. Whilst it is tempting to attribute Vauxhall's uniquely tranquil industrial relations to the impact of the MAC, clearly a number of factors stymied the processes that produced more militant trade unionism at other factories. Unpicking the varying contributions of management, activists and members to this state of affairs is difficult. As the example of Standard illustrates, co-operative industrial relations did not necessarily produce clientelism, and worker representatives and members did not always accept that institutions should function as management intended.

Whilst we can point to a number of contextual factors that discouraged workplace conflict at Vauxhall Luton, the perpetuation of less strike-prone cultures there undoubtedly also derived from the choices made by activist and non-activist workers there. The decision by factory union leaders to work within the MAC structure and later to develop strong relationships with full-time officials was no doubt important, as was the apparent general acceptance amongst the workforce that such representation was adequate for their needs. Why this was the case might be made clearer by further examination of the *Affluent Worker* interviews (unfortunately unavailable to me whilst writing this thesis – see Chapter One).

Certainly the survey responses that appear in the published work indicate that Vauxhall's more peaceful industrial relations record reflected many workers' perception that their employer was fairer than others, as stated by 73 per cent of interviewees.<sup>430</sup> When asked to reflect on the firm's record of peaceful labour relations, the majority of responses (61 per cent) attributed it to good management and union practice.<sup>431</sup> "Mr. Taylor", whose interview is described in detail in the first volume of the series, even cites Vauxhall's reputation for

---

430 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 72, 77.

431 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 77.

industrial peace as the reason for his initial attraction to the firm.<sup>432</sup> Such attitudes may perhaps be related to Charles Bartlett's legacy (see above) and the operation of the MAC system, and further study of this source might shed light on the extent to which the company was able to successfully promote the idea that their firm was an especially progressive one.

For the purposes of this study the reflections of more militant activists like the contributors to Solidarity, and the Len Holden interviewees, offer sufficient evidence for the central contention of this section, that the peaceful industrial relations that predominated at Luton show that strike-prone workplace cultures were not inherent to post-war car plants. Although the “cabbage patch” epithet implied this could be attributed to the workforce's rural Bedfordshire origins, that the factory drew employees from all over Britain points to something else.<sup>433</sup> Militancy was a feature of workplace culture which had to be actively constructed by worker activists, and broadly accepted by the wider workforce in order to come into existence. Despite similar economic circumstances and industrial relations procedures, up until the mid-1960s Vauxhall workers evidently chose not to generate the same social practices and engage in the same collective behaviour as their counterparts elsewhere. That motor industry “militancy” was not universal further emphasises the importance of worker agency within these social processes.

## Conclusion

The twenty-year period between 1945 and 1965 saw a substantial transformation in the collective behaviour of many groups of car workers. By the end of the period workers had available to them a broad range of social

---

432 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 170-171.

433 Only 30 per cent of the sample were brought up in the Luton area, see: Goldthorpe and others, see: *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 150.



practices, from which they derived new social power and rights and which substantially changed the nature of workplace life and its social relations. These changes were the basis for what industrial relations scholars refer to as “the second system of industrial relations”.<sup>434</sup> Whilst the social and political context beyond the factory was clearly important to the emergence of this system, the agency of worker activists was also crucial. Without the time-consuming and risky endeavours of large number of car workers, the world of shop steward committees and shop-floor bargaining could never have emerged. Consequently, accounts of post-war workplace conflict that depend solely on economic motivation or industrial relations regimes as explanatory factors, and that overlook the dynamic element of worker agency, can only capture a very partial image of what drove changes in workplace life in this period.

During these two decades, workers re-invented what it meant to be a trade unionist in the motor industry, forging new solidarities, new collectivities and new ways of thinking about factory life, employing ideas and practices specific to post-war trade unionism. This process was not solely economic; it involved the adoption of new social connections and cultural values, which changed the operation of their pragmatic reasoning. These developments, with their new values of interdependence and solidarity, add force to Mike Savage's critique of post-war binaries, where traditional values, solidarity and collectivism were counterpoised with modern values, like instrumentalism and individualism.<sup>435</sup> For many post-war car workers, it was their sense of solidarity and collectivism that was new, rather than their experiences of affluence and privatism.

Finally, although some basic features - like shop steward organisation – were eventually generalised across the industry through the actions of combine

---

434 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 36–37.

435 Savage, 'Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures', p. 24.

committees, trade unions, firms and the state, the divergent historical experiences of different factories suggest there was no one way of being a car factory trade unionist. These variations, which I will explore further in Chapter Four, can only be understood with reference to the underlying process of sectional organisation I have outlined in the first part of this chapter. Their emergence shows that the unofficial militancy which marked the 1960s was not an inevitable outcome of full employment and the post-war settlement, or the uncomplicated effect of changing industrial relations institutions. Those factories where worker activists developed substantial power on the shop floor had to break with industrial relations as understood by their employers and by mainstream public discourse. Workers founded their own organisations and found new uses for the spaces granted to them (particularly those at a sectional level), overfilling their roles within the bargaining process.

This chapter has shown that, rather than being a simple effect of the post-war settlement, the emergence of shop-floor bargaining was largely driven by the activities of car workers themselves. Employees were able to re-make workplace life during this period, developing the capacity to create the sort of collective social power that can only be understood through analysis of communicative action. Changing cultures, values and social practices were just as crucial as economic motivations and labour movement traditions to the militancy that developed in later decades. These changes, driven forward by workers themselves in uneven, contingent, partial and sectional ways, left a profound historical legacy, shaping the organisations with which car workers confronted the events of the 1960s and 1970s. Understanding the origins of those organisations will help us to better explain in the following chapter the nature of the shop-floor practices that would structure collective action in the years to come.

## **Chapter Four: The social practices of shop-floor trade unionism in the car industry 1964-1975**

At their 1964 Annual General Meeting, the Longbridge JSSC celebrated their success in unionising the factory, boasting that they were now '100 per cent organised' with nearly 600 shop stewards.<sup>436</sup> Similar developments had taken place across the industry as worker activism created new social practices and organisations. Over the next ten years, these organisations would develop ever more notoriety for their militancy, as their members, along with miners, dockers and shipbuilders, became one of Britain's four most strike-prone industrial groups, the number of officially-recorded strike days per car worker multiplying from 0.4 per year (1953-9) to 1.14 (1960-68) and then to 3.4 (1969-73).<sup>437</sup> This chapter will look at the nature of such workplace organisation in greater detail, aiming at a thicker description of the *habitus* workers had created and analysing the ways in which it enabled and encouraged certain collective behaviours.

As we saw in Chapter Two, much discussion of this changing behaviour revolved around its supposed dysfunctionality. In the context of more general concerns about national decline, public discourse tended to consider the industrial strength of car workers and their “over-mighty” unions mostly in terms of the negative effects it was presumed to have on the economy, a tendency that intensified as commentators looked to place blame for the industry's increasingly uncompetitive position in the global car market. “Self-interested” car workers, or disruptive militant minorities within their ranks, emerged as popular scapegoats for the plight of the industry and the nation. Subsequently, historians have either echoed or countered these ideas. The narrative which

---

436 Longbridge AGM, January 1964.

437 These statistics refer only to strikes reported to the Ministry of Labour and likely underestimate the amount of time workers spent on strike. See: Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, pp. 62, 97, 136, 318.

holds unconstrained union militancy responsible for national economic problems and the decline of the motor industry is reproduced in the work of Brian Harrison, as well as by David Childs and John Turner. Turner's account is typical in attributing the failure of British attempts at corporatism to a trade union movement that was too fragmented, plagued by multi-unionism and too attached to free collective bargaining.<sup>438</sup> The charges are repeated - albeit sometimes with acknowledgement of management's contribution - in most economic histories of the motor industry, as writers like Roy Church, Tim Whisler and Peter Dunnett searched for reasons for the eventual disappearance of British-owned firms.<sup>439</sup>

Conversely, as I noted in my introduction, many labour historians, generally treating their subject with greater sympathy, have preferred to counter these charges by stressing how conflict reflected conventional and legitimate industrial issues. Certainly the period from 1965 to 1979 provided workers with plentiful *casus belli*, particularly when the ever rising cost of living was politicised by incomes policies and industrial relations reforms.<sup>440</sup> From the early 1960s onwards, car workers in particular were also confronted by a growing conviction amongst companies and governments that the industry required substantial reform and rationalisation to be globally competitive. To this end, the first Wilson government encouraged industrial consolidation, promoting BMC takeovers of Pressed Steel in 1965 and Jaguar in 1966, the Leyland-Triumph absorption of Rover in 1967, and finally the formation of British Leyland [BL] with a merger of all those companies in 1968.<sup>441</sup> Industrial restructuring was accompanied by new industrial relations policies, with motor firms moving

---

438 John Turner, 'Governors, Governance and Governed', p. 31; Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 232.

439 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 210–218; Church, pp. 64–68; Peter Dunnett, *The Decline of the British Motor Industry: The Effects of Government Policy, 1945-1979* (London: Croom Helm), pp. 54–55; Martin Adeney, *The Motor Makers: The Turbulent History of Britain's Car Industry* (London: Collins, 1988), p. 236.

440 Wrigley, *British Trade Unions since 1933*, p. 20.

441 Dunnett, *Decline of the British Motor Industry*, pp. 99–100.

towards “comprehensive bargaining”, which aimed to abolish piecework with its attendant decentralised wage bargaining, and introducing more formal wage negotiations and grievance procedures.<sup>442</sup> Through this, they hoped to cut costs, improve productivity and rationalise production, raising the spectre of both redundancy and increasing workload.

As BL and Chrysler became more financially precarious, particularly after the 1973 oil crash, their workers found themselves under increasing scrutiny, as management sought to reduce costs and improve labour discipline. Finally, following the bailout of Chrysler and nationalisation of BL in 1975, government involvement brought external pressure to increase productivity in exchange for further taxpayer investment.<sup>443</sup> Meanwhile, despite the company's profitability, even Ford workers found themselves intermittently threatened with disinvestment, as management threatened to move work to Spain, Germany and Belgium in their attempts to raise productivity and hold down pay.<sup>444</sup> When added to long-standing grievances over wage and job security, life in the industry thus offered both chronic and episodic problems for car workers.

As a corrective to the popular narrative of the period, a sober evaluation of workers' very real economic issues is necessary. Yet, whatever motivation inflation, incomes policies, industrial relations acts and efficiency drives may have provided, they were never uncomplicated causes of conflict and William Sewell is right to caution that labour historians are often 'too easily satisfied by material explanations'.<sup>445</sup> External factors often constituted the immediate

---

442 Tolliday, 'Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organisation in the British Motor Industry 1939-69', pp. 135–136.

443 Paul Willman and Graham Winch, *Innovation and Management Control : Labour Relations at BL Cars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 94.

444 Thomas Fetzer, 'International Challenges and National Allegiances : British and West German Trade Union Politics at Ford, 1967-1973', *Contemporary European History*, 18 (2009), 99–122 (pp. 107–114).

445 William H. Sewell, Jr., 'Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History', in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, ed. by Leonard R. Berlanstein (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 15–38 (p. 17).

source of disagreement but dictated neither the form nor significance that social mobilisation took. In attributing a greater share of the blame for the dysfunctionality of industrial relations to governments and employers, labour historians have often neglected the positive preferences of workers for certain types of disruption. Reid, for instance, stresses the extent to which government incomes policies were responsible for the emergence of the “fragmented” bargaining discussed by Turner.<sup>446</sup> Elsewhere, Robert Taylor has countered accusations that union power wrecked the nation by reducing its potency.<sup>447</sup> Yet, despite all this discussion of both the form and extent of workers' power in this period, detailed historical consideration of how organisation at work actually operated is conspicuously absent. Historians have been happy to draw attention to issues like “fragmentation”, and its various accompanying themes of multi-unionism, demarcation and differentials, but have been reluctant to spell out in substantial detail what these terms meant in practice. Similarly, whilst “union power” has been discussed at length in post-war Britain, historians have rarely been drawn on precisely who wielded this power and on what terms, attributing it merely to abstract institutions.

As we have seen in Chapter Three, grievances in themselves did not always produce strikes and workers did not always mobilise in uniform ways. Looking beyond economic explanations for increased union activity during this period, this chapter will look at the ways in which the organisations they established enabled workers to exercise agency within both the workplace and wider British society. In the first section, dealing with the mid-1960s, my analysis will focus on the social practices, principally the system of factory representatives and workshop assemblies through which workers conducted sectional bargaining, that emerged from the organising described in the previous chapter. Rather than seeing such forms as a dysfunctional “fragmentation” of trade unionism,

---

446 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 284–286.

447 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 2.

this chapter will look at why workers sustained these forms of organising. Of particular interest will be how sectionalism allowed “ordinary” car workers to wield substantial control over both union organisation and working conditions, whilst opening up new political and social spaces for many of those more marginalised in wider society, like the far left, the low paid, women and minority ethnic groups. I will also look at the constraints those practices placed on car workers, including reluctant trade unionists, more passive “ordinary” members and active militants, by limiting and controlling their behaviours. I will argue that central to these developments was a bottom-up process of social engagement and empowerment, in which workers involved themselves in new forms of collective mobilisation and decision-making.

The second section will look at the so-called “high tide” of labour militancy between 1968 and 1975, analysing the different ways in which car workers and their factory organisations reacted to a changing economic and political climate. Responding to the considerable social power that workers had developed through sectional shop-floor activism, both the state and capital looked to reshape labour relations, introducing more formalised agreements as a means of reducing conflict and improving productivity. Consequently workers often found themselves confronting new policies at factory, company and national levels for which their organisations were ill-quipped. This new context, structured by the agency of a changing cast of worker activists, as well as by prevailing social conditions, produced a variety of responses. My analysis in this section will consider the changing forms of organisation at five factories during this period, and look at the different social practices that were developed to deal with their organisations’ need to respond to the pressures of managerial centralisation. The solutions that emerged would shape the social power of the workforce, as a group and individually.

## **The legacy of the 1950s: Piecework and shop bargaining in the mid-1960s**

As we saw in Chapter Three, during the 1950s workers' social power was largely constructed on the basis of everyday bargaining at sectional level over working conditions, discipline, wages and effort. The general pattern of social organisation in the mid-1960s reflected this historical process, particularly in terms of the capacity of workgroups to bargain independently. Often the product of autonomous acts of creation, workshop organisations maintained a substantial degree of independence. Although fragmentation by craft and department - "sectionalism" - has often been treated as a "breakdown" in unity, it was a historical product of workers' attempts to organise in the 1950s. It therefore reflected not a failure to sustain a proper 'integrated organisation',<sup>448</sup> but rather an attempt to construct a different kind of unity, one which reflected workers' experiences more directly than the "external collective bargaining" of the immediate post-war period. Given that these forms of organising were as much a product of workers' invention as they were industrial relations institutions, it appears that sectionalism was not without its advantages.

The capacity to decide and act autonomously of the union and factory organisation delivered a degree of control over many issues important to the workforce, foremost amongst them pay. Between 1960 and 1968 car workers largely retained their wage advantage relative to other manual workers<sup>449</sup> and piecework bargaining in particular offered workers regular opportunities to negotiate and improve wages, especially at places like Longbridge, where the works convenor was dealing with an average of four piecework bargains a week.<sup>450</sup> Over time shop stewards developed a strong sense of their leverage

---

448 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. 284–286.

449 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 333.

450 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/58-60, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 31 May to 4 June, 16 to 20 August, 22-26 November 1965; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/61-64, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 7-11 February, 9-13 May, 15-19 August, 28 November to 2 December 1966.



and of the value of particular jobs, learning how to push up wages through a combination of bartering and a strong knowledge of rates and production figures. In negotiations they usually followed a line of reasoning similar to that put forward by one in the Longbridge paint shop in 1965, where they used job changes to argue for better earnings:

*The maximum possible output on ADO17 [The Austin 1800] would be 5 per hour on your offered price [and] it [the job] would only show 8/11 per hour[.] This is considerably less than the figures you have quoted and the normal earnings on [the] previous model. Under these circumstances we are asking for a better offer.*<sup>451</sup>

This steward had worked out the maximum number of Austin 1800s they could paint per hour, the rate they would receive for it and then compared it to their earnings on the previous model as an argument for a higher rate.

Towards the end of the 1960s some car workers began to claim they had mastered these piecework negotiations. In the words of Cowley assembly plant steward Bill Jupp, 'over the years I suppose we developed a uncanny sense of how much a job would be worth.'<sup>452</sup> As the Austin works bulletin circulated by Birmingham International Socialists put it in 1969: 'Experienced piece workers have learnt over the years how to work the system increasingly to their own advantage. As the role of the shop steward has grown in importance under such a system, that of the supervisor has declined.'<sup>453</sup> By the end of the decade, demands for piecework price increases were going beyond negotiations over new tasks, with workgroups increasingly asking for wage improvements as

---

451 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/58, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 4 June 1965.

452 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 70.

453 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, Papers of Colin Barker [Hereafter CB], MSS.152/1/5/12, Austin East Works International Socialists Bulletin, 28 October 1969.

simple 'across the board' increases or as a response to a rising cost of living.<sup>454</sup>

During this period, non-pieceworkers had also become regularly involved in sectional activism, arguing for increases in order to keep pace with other workers. L. Hale, a steward in the Longbridge East Works transport garage, wrote a letter to the factory convenor in 1967 expressing such aspirations:

*My members have been fighting for a wage increase for the last two years without success. We feel we cannot get involved in talks to stabilise a wage which we think is not a fair exchange for the work we do, as the type of work we do is of a superior grade to departments getting in excess of four pounds per week more than us, we shall continue to fight for recognition as a highly skilled department and wipe out the smear of being the lowest paid of the skilled dayworkers.*<sup>455</sup>

The transport workers demanded increased wages on the grounds that their living standards were deteriorating relative to other groups of workers, and the tendency noted in the previous chapter, for non-production workers to demand changes to a wage structure which they saw as favouring the pieceworkers, also intensified in this period. By 1968, demands for "lieu rates", a bonus based on the average earnings of pieceworkers, were becoming increasingly ambitious, with marshallers, cleaners and labourers demanding up to 75 per cent of the piecework bonus on top of their basic wage rates, and some material handlers even asking for parity with production workers.<sup>456</sup>

Although sectional bargaining was strongest at piecework factories like

---

454 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/68, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 4 February 1969.

455 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Letter, L. Hale to Dick Etheridge, October 1967.

456 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/90, The Anti-Capitalist Tendency, "The United Car Worker" (Bulletin), 1967; Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism*, pp. 35–36.

Longbridge, workers at Ford and Vauxhall also fought for additional bonuses related to difficult working conditions or arduous labour.<sup>457</sup> Moreover, despite Measured Day Work [MDW] theoretically offering a guaranteed hourly wage, there were plenty of irregularities and anomalies for activists to set straight and Ford workers still found themselves fighting overtime discrimination or cuts to working hours.<sup>458</sup> Wage militancy however, was limited by the constraints of national bargaining and the limits of trade union organisation, with industrial conflict at Luton, Ellesmere Port, Dagenham and Halewood generally taking place over issues related to hours, job security, working conditions, discipline or line speed. In 1965 most strikes at Ford and Vauxhall were of this kind. For example, in March 2,400 workers walked out at Ellesmere Port over an unfair dismissal case, and in May 850 workers struck at Halewood for the inclusion of a meal break in their 8-hour night shift. Further strikes followed in the same month at Basildon, Luton and Dagenham over foremen favouring “blue-eyed boys” in the allocation of overtime, complaints at refusals to upgrade labourers, the sub-contracting of work and over unpleasant conditions.<sup>459</sup>

Workers at Halewood emphasised the importance of sectional activism in gaining a measure of control over line speed. As one worker put it, 'You'd be working. Get into a bit of a system and just about keeping the job under control and then you'd find that you'd lost control, like. You'd be working that bit harder again. The bastards had altered the line speed. They'd swear blind they hadn't but they had. We put a stop to that though. Little Bob's got the key now.'<sup>460</sup> In light of Ford's earlier attempts to impose higher work standards (discussed in Chapter Two), the belief that constant vigilance was required to maintain that status quo seems well-founded. Sectional bargaining afforded a measure of

---

457 Cohen, *Notoriously Militant*, pp. 83–84; Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 163.

458 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 145–146, 154–155.

459 National Archives, Kew, Papers of the Ministry of Labour and Successors [Hereafter NA], LAB 17/369, Schedules of Stoppages, January 1965 - July 1966.

460 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 76.

control over working conditions and limited the extent to which workers could be exploited.

Beyond pay and productivity, de-centralised trade unionism largely put an end to unilateral managerial discipline. The old right of supervisors to arbitrarily dismiss workers had almost entirely disappeared by the 1960s, increasingly replaced by formal disciplinary procedures which management were forced to operate in good faith. According to Eddie Roberts, a paint shop steward at Halewood, 'When we were here first [in the early 1960s] the foremen really threw their weight around and it took a bit of time to sort things... Since then they've tended to send weak foremen down to us. They leave us alone and we leave them alone. One or two of them have tried to get on top but they're easy to beat.'<sup>461</sup> Objections to heavy-handed supervision and abuse of disciplinary sanctions were a regular feature of factory conflict, with particularly ambitious workers even raising active demands that supervisors better serve their supposed subordinates. In one case, in October 1967, the steward for a group of Longbridge crankshaft machinists complained that:

*The supervision in No.5 [his shop] are not at all interested in the safety and welfare of the personnel in our shop... On several occasions we have brought the Senior Superintendent (W. Tranter) and also the Safety Officer to look at the conditions of the shop, gangways are blocked in a dangerous manner, also the attitude of the supervision when we raise these issues is one of apathy.*<sup>462</sup>

Further grievances relating to diesel fumes were also raised, with the steward calling on the works committee to 'really put pressure' on management to sort

---

<sup>461</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 104.

<sup>462</sup> RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Letter, "A" Series shop stewards to Dick Etheridge, 27 September 1967.

the supervision problem out. Increasingly this sort of pressure constrained the behaviour of even quite senior managers.<sup>463</sup>

Thus, although Robert Taylor has linked sectionalism to an obsession with pay that eroded 'older notions of solidarity' and reduced trade unionism to a mere 'meal ticket',<sup>464</sup> in many cases workers found that steward-led sectional activism helped relieve not only grievances over important issues like pay, productivity and discipline, but also a wide array of other issues. At Rootes' Stoke Aldermoor Plant in 1967 wages made up just 15 per cent of all issues discussed on the JSSC, with stewards spending the rest of time debating hours and job security (26 per cent), casework pertaining to individuals and their rights (4 per cent), union democracy and organisation (28 per cent), issues external to the factory (10 per cent) and working conditions (13 per cent).<sup>465</sup> Sections brought to these meetings issues ranging from complaints over union rights, lay-offs, transfers, line speed, demarcation and overtime, to less conventional issues like the provision of a "rehabilitation department" for workers currently unfit for production.<sup>466</sup> In other meetings, stewards brought up disputes relating to management neglect of ill workers, accident prevention and factory cleanliness.<sup>467</sup> With its intense focus on the nature of everyday life, sectional activism could widen the type of issues that featured in collective discussion.

### *Participatory democracy and sectional autonomy*

In addition to the variety of issues which sectional militancy could address, the

---

463 "A" Series Stewards to Dick Etheridge, 27 September 1967.

464 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 186.

465 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, Chrysler UK Shop Stewards Collection [Hereafter CUK], MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1967.

466 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 January, 6 February, 3 April, 5 June 1967.

467 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 6 March 1967.

use of highly participatory social practices meant power often extended beyond a minority of committed activists and included ordinary stewards and members. This advantage is usually obscured in most versions of the fragmentation thesis, but is crucial to understanding workers' social power in this period. Under sectional bargaining, pay and conditions were regularly determined by shop-level bartering, a situation that gave workgroups a great deal of control. As Frank Henderson, a Trotskyist steward at Longbridge, put it:

*The management tended to say, "This is as much as we can possibly afford. We cannot afford any more. The vehicle won't be economic if we pay what you are asking for." The shop steward would say, "The blokes won't stand for that and will walk out." The steward would report back to the blokes. They would say bugger this, put their coats on and walk off home, usually an hour or so before knocking off time, then come back in the next morning and the gaffer would say, "Now look here, let's start talking sensibly about this."<sup>468</sup>*

Crucially in terms of the social power of the wider membership, although this activity revolved around the steward, sectional bargaining enabled members to participate in collective democracy on a manageable scale. Negotiations were usually conducted on the basis of shop meetings, where workers could agree mandates for stewards to bring to management. Any subsequent offer would then be brought back to members for a further meeting, whereupon they voted again. Thus, if the "ordinary member" solely valued the union for its capacity to improve wages or defend working conditions this system delivered substantial control over the wage-effort bargain. Through small-scale democratic processes workers could have meaningful collective discussions, expressing

---

<sup>468</sup> Frank Henderson, *Life on the Track : Memoirs of a Socialist Worker* (London: Bookmarks, 2009), p. 49.

their views on more or less equal terms with their co-workers.

Dick Etheridge's daily working notes are a testament to this kind of social practice, with the Longbridge convenor spending most of his time during the late 1960s on precisely these sorts of negotiations. One meeting involving Etheridge, management and three stewards from the Finishing Line in Longbridge's Trentham Building in 1967 was fairly typical. Brother Fuller, a steward for a group of trackworkers, did most of the talking, haggling with management over a new price for fitting headlights. Fuller informed management of his mandate (to settle for a 9s basic hourly rate), and eventually what he was prepared to recommend (7s 6d) to his members. Management dismissed the request and stated that any price rise would require the job being re-timed. Having failed to agree a new price, Fuller and his fellow stewards informed management that 'they were prepared to report back' the details of the discussion for further debate.<sup>469</sup> Subsequently, the finishing line workers would have a shop meeting and decide whether it was worth taking the matter through procedure or striking.

These routines: agreeing demands, negotiations by mandated delegates, then "report back" meetings to decide what to do next were repeated at Longbridge on a daily basis, and also appear to have been a feature of organisation elsewhere.<sup>470</sup> Stewards seldom decided to accept management offers on a unilateral basis. Indeed, in a sample of 25 disputes attended by Etheridge in 1968, only once did the stewards do so, generally deciding to report back to their members or register a formal "failure to agree".<sup>471</sup> Although Tolliday

---

469 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 7 February 1967.

470 Sheila Cohen, 'Equal Pay - or What? Economics, Politics and the 1968 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike', *Labor History*, 53, 51–68 (p. 55).

471 Figures generated from analysis of meetings from four randomly chosen weeks of Etheridge's notes for that year. See RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/66, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 5–9 February, 13–17 May 1968; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/67, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 18–22 August, 25–29 November 1968. These figures broadly tally with a survey quoted by Robert Taylor claiming that 73 per cent of workers agreed that they,

dismisses these practices as 'primitive direct democracy',<sup>472</sup> through them, groups of workers could formulate demands over a wide range of issues, retaining substantial control over the way negotiations unfolded. Crucially, such meetings were usually small enough to allow widespread participation. In contrast to the mass meetings that would become more common later on, constituencies of around 40 members enabled most workers to engage in discussion and make substantial interventions in debates.<sup>473</sup> In this way sectional activism enabled workers to exercise considerable control over the functioning of their union organisation and the conduct of negotiations, giving them a direct means through which they could re-make their lives at work.

### *Power on the fringes of shop-floor bargaining*

Although trade unionism in this period is often seen as being about the exclusivity of demarcated workgroups, the sectional form that shop-floor bargaining took delivered considerable benefits to many "ordinary" car workers, establishing control and autonomy for the work group, and often enabling a high degree of democratic participation. Moreover, shop-floor bargaining had the side effect of allowing more marginal groups to make some unlikely interventions of their own, most obviously, those workers with fringe political ideas, who were generally excluded from positions of authority elsewhere in British life. Having looked in greater detail at the origins and operation of sectional bargaining, we can better comprehend how direct, small-scale workshop democracy could encourage a level of political pluralism generally absent in electoral politics. The ability of Communists to sustain such substantial influence in the motor industry despite the party's mostly derisory results in national elections was the most obvious reflection of this. Although

---

rather than their stewards, decided when to go on strike, see: Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 131.

472 Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 205.

473 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 204.



their hold on senior positions has sometimes been attributed to apathy, or a practical dependence on their bargaining abilities<sup>474</sup>, detailed study of workshop life reveals that most political pluralism in this period is better explained by the nature of the shop steward system itself. Within the shop workers chose not abstract political ideas, but (often personally popular<sup>475</sup>) workmates whom they knew well and whose political orientations they understood in the context of everyday life. As one worker at British Leyland's Drews Lane Plant put it: 'you're a Communist but you're OK, a good bloke, but it's those Communists in the pits who are trouble'.<sup>476</sup> Whilst workers may have sympathised with broad anti-Communist discourses more generally, within the same communicative space which enabled workers to transgress public norms on collective bargaining their choices were less bound by the logic of mass politics and did not automatically identify politicised workers as outsiders.<sup>477</sup>

The Communists were not the only beneficiaries of this tendency. Sectional bargaining enabled all sorts of workers with non-mainstream left-wing ideals to propagate and put into action their politics. The degree of sympathy Brian Lynam apparently found from his co-workers at Longbridge in the mid-Sixties was illustrative of this tendency. Lynam was a member of a "Posadist"<sup>478</sup> group called the Anti-Capitalist Tendency, for whom he published a newsletter entitled "The United Car Worker", which proclaimed in its strap-line the need for 'a national organisation of shop stewards' committees on a workers' programme'.<sup>479</sup> Lynam's newsletter gives the impression that he was the only

---

474 Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 80–86; Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, pp. 138–143.

475 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 128.

476 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 85.

477 Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 48.

478 Posadism was the ideology of a small socialist international led by Argentine Trotskyist J. Posadas. Its followers were sometimes referred to on the left as the "flying saucer Trots" in reference to an pamphlet written by Posadas about the possible existence of extra-terrestrial socialists. See: J. Posadas, *Les Soucoupes Volantes, Le Processus de la Matière et de l'Energie, la Science, la Lutte de Classes et Revolutionnaire et le Future Socialiste de l'Humanité* (Paris: Éditions Réed, 1968).

479 'United Car Worker, 1967'.

member of the group at Longbridge, and possibly throughout the country.

Although his politics would likely have been regarded as eccentric even by most people on the far left, under the conditions of sectionalism the factory could still be a setting for a meaningful political intervention on his part. He was evidently well-enough liked personally by the East Works labourers to be elected as shop steward, and convincing enough to lead the workers into a wildcat strike which successfully won the reinstatement of a colleague who had been sacked for questioning his workload.<sup>480</sup> He also appears to have been a key part of a mobilisation amongst the East Works labourers over progression (promotion), which remained an ongoing campaign with mass support even after he himself was dismissed. Despite being the only Longbridge adherent to his doctrine, the open democratic social practices in the factory enabled him to use his politics to help mobilise his workgroup to challenge racial discrimination,<sup>481</sup> making a material difference to the lives of his fellow workers. Whilst Lynam could never hope to create his 'national organisation of shop stewards' committees on a workers programme', the factory was a sphere in which he (and others) could and did have a genuine influence in practical issues.

Sectionalism could also benefit other groups conventionally excluded from social power. Lynam's organising at Longbridge reflected the initial stages of what would become a long-running fight against racial discrimination in the motor industry, where access to the best-paying jobs had often been monopolised through social networks run by stewards or foremen. Organised largely along kinship-lines, these restricted many jobs to those with personal connections to the existing workforce, a tendency sometimes reinforced by

---

480 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/90, An Austin Steward, "Austin Labourers Prepare for Militant Action" (handbill), November 1967.

481 No mention of Lynam's ethnic background is made in Etheridge's papers, which, given the normative nature of whiteness in this period, likely means he was white.

closed shop rules.<sup>482</sup> One effect of this tendency was that immigrants from South Asia and the Caribbean, excluded from such networks, could often obtain only the least desirable jobs in the factory, particularly physically demanding low-paid roles like material handling.<sup>483</sup> Satnam Virdee has argued that as a result of this type of de facto colour bar the period from 1945 to 1965 can be regarded as the 'golden age of white supremacy' in Britain's factories.<sup>484</sup>

However, the expansion of sectional activism did leave space for what Virdee refers to as “racialized outsiders” to act as a “leavening agent”, enabling challenges to workplace racism. As I noted in the previous chapter, sectional activism gradually extended to all groups of car workers, including the indirects.<sup>485</sup> One consequence of this, as weaker groups gradually discovered their capacity to use industrial action and pay comparisons to demand increases, was a steady improvement in the material position of the lowest paid, with differentials between them and the more skilled workers declining from 1967 onwards.<sup>486</sup> Another outcome was that groups of immigrant workers began to use their sectional organisations to demand access to progression. The protest of the (mostly Afro-Caribbean) East Works labourers in September 1966 is one example of this. The workers there agreed a set of three demands which they posed to the JSSC:

---

482 Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men : Factory Culture and Pride in Work Skills among Coventry Car Workers', *Social History*, 13 (1988), 45–69 (pp. 53–54); Henrietta Ewart, “Coventry Irish” : Community, Class, Culture and Narrative in the Formation of a Migrant Identity, 1940-1970', *Midland History*, 36 (2011), 225–44 (p. 232).

483 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/3/23, Livingstone Webb Interview, 19 November 1982; Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class*, p. 321; Stephen Ward, Ossie Stuart and E. Swingedouw, 'Cowley in the Oxford Economy', in *The Factory and the City : The Story of the Cowley Automobile Workers in Oxford*, ed. by David Harvey and Teresa Hayter (London: Mansell, 1993), pp. 67–92 (pp. 81–82).

484 Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1–7.

485 In some factories the involvement of Caribbean shop stewards in workplace unionism is noted as early as 1961, see: Ken Weller, *The BLSP Dispute: The Story of the Strike* (Whipsnade: Morse, 1962), p. 15.

486 Hugh Scullion, 'The Skilled Revolt against General Unionism: The Case of the BL Toolroom Committee', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 12 (1981), 15–27 (p. 18).

- 1. That a system of upgrading be instituted, based on a list of vacancies at the Longbridge works, in order that semi-skilled jobs can be filled by labourers already employed by the company.*
- 2. That all labourers' jobs be investigated with a view to the reclassification of those jobs which are the work of higher grades and that these jobs be paid accordingly.*
- 3. That all men be employed, not on the basis of race, or colour but on the basis of their skill and their ability to do the job.<sup>487</sup>*

When their complaint was met with management denials of a colour bar, the East Works labourers dispute escalated to a 3-day strike in November 1967 and an overtime ban in 1968.<sup>488</sup> Such organising would become increasingly common as the proportion of workers from the Caribbean and South Asia rose in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>489</sup> Thus, although sectionalism subsequently acquired a reputation for being largely about the defence of existing privileges,<sup>490</sup> it did at times open up spaces for groups to challenge discrimination.

If this anti-racist activism went largely unseen, the struggles of another marginalised group in industry became front page news in June 1968. The Dagenham sewing machinists' strike was the subject of great media attention as a group of women demanding equal pay and is recalled primarily for being

---

487 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/90, Austin Longbridge East Works Labourers Committee, "Full Support for the Labourers" Demands' (handbill), November 1967.

488 Clifford Webb, 'BMH Tightens Management Control at Longbridge', *The Times*, 23 February 1968, p. 20.

489 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 29; 'Livingstone Webb Interview, 19 November 1982'; McIlroy, 'Always Outnumbered', pp. 266–270; Martin Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent*, pp. 66–68.

490 Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation', p. 186.

different from the usual “male, pale and stale” trade unionism. The strike was certainly distinctive because in the words of one participant, 'it was the first time for us, it was a new experience, because it was for women, and I felt, at last we were doing something for us, instead of being put out because the men wanted something.'<sup>491</sup> Yet it was also a vivid demonstration that women also had access to some of the social resources of sectional trade unionism. As another striker recalled, 'Well, it's not something that we didn't know about, really, is it? Because, you know, Ford's was known for wild-cat strikes and things like that.'<sup>492</sup>

Women constituted up to 10 per cent of all car workers and, although mainly employed in sewing departments (the so-called “industrial kitchen”), they could also be found in other “light” occupations working as polishers, soft component fitters and inspectors.<sup>493</sup> The Dagenham women, like their counterparts elsewhere,<sup>494</sup> had long been involved with trade unionism, having been instrumental to militancy during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>495</sup> Indeed, during the 1962 assembly plant strike (see Chapter Three), the London region NUVB singled out the sewing machinists to praise their high levels of union loyalty.<sup>496</sup> The 1968 strike was also organised through a key social practice of 1960s trade unionism - shop meetings conducted by their stewards, Rose Boland and Lil O'Callaghan.<sup>497</sup> Once the strike had begun, and even after it had finished, the strikers themselves articulated their demands in the language of comparison that was the norm for sectional militancy, articulating their right to

---

491 'Women Strike for Equal Pay, 1968 (audio)', *Learning Zone Broadband Class Clips*, 2010 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/women-strike-for-equal-pay-1968-audio/11139.html>> [accessed 10 May 2013].

492 'Women Strike for Equal Pay, 1968 (audio)'.

493 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 32.

494 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 213; Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict', p. 59.

495 Halpin, *Memoirs*, pp. 32,34, 51; Cohen, 'Equal Pay - or What?', p. 62.

496 London Metropolitan Archives, Papers of the National Union of Vehicle Builders London District, ACC 3289/10, NUVB London District Committee Meeting Minutes, 10 December 1962.

497 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 130–131.

be graded in accordance with their skill levels.<sup>498</sup> Already a familiar part of the class politics of Dagenham, the sewing machinists were able to express new forms of gendered militancy within the existing social practices of the workforce, even if, as Howarth argues, there was a more general male antipathy towards women's activity in strikes in this period.<sup>499</sup> That their activism enabled them to intervene in national debates surrounding gender inequality is testimony to how sectional bargaining could enable comparatively small groups to re-shape their working lives in quite profound ways.

## **The limitations of sectionalism**

The Dagenham sewing machinists' dispute had many special features – particularly the media attention and the solidarity felt by the women themselves – but in some ways the women's actions were enabled by the more commonplace social practices of 1960s trade unionism, showing the power of sectional activism to be more than mere disorder. Yet for all that shop bargaining was able to spread direct democracy, autonomy and social power amongst some car workers, in none of these areas was it unconstrained, and the organisations that car workers created shaped their activism in ways that limited as well as enabled. Strikes like that of the Dagenham sewing machinists generated as many problems for participants, their co-workers and their trade unions as for the company, the most obvious of which was the expense. Although hostile newspaper commentators liked to emphasise the range of benefits available to strikers in this period – income tax rebates, supplementary benefits, strike pay – going on strike still involved the loss of a high proportion of earnings.<sup>500</sup> Whilst success might mean these losses were recouped through

---

498 Cohen, 'Equal Pay - or What?'.  
499 Janet Howarth, 'Classes and Cultures in England after 1951 : The Case of Working-Class Women', in *Classes, Cultures and Politics : Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. by Clare V.J. Griffiths, William Whyte, and James J. Nott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 85–101 (p. 100).

500 Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 21.

increased earnings over time, workers still suffered considerable privation during disputes.

Sectional disputes also affected non-striking co-workers. As a result of the Dagenham sewing machinists strike, Ford's storage facilities rapidly began to fill with unfinished cars and within a week the company was threatening to lay off thousands of workers.<sup>501</sup> Autonomy for one's own group also meant autonomy for everyone else and since car factory production was inherently vulnerable to disruption by small groups, non-striking car workers frequently lost work. In order to mitigate such effects, shop and factory organisations developed social practices and cultural norms for determining when industrial action was legitimate. These practices principally consisted of either stewards or managers calling upon factory leaders to mediate in negotiations and determine the justice of the workers' case. Dick Etheridge's papers are littered with small notes requesting his presence at different negotiations. *Figure 4*, depicting a request from management to respond to a strike, and *Figure 5*, where a steward asks Etheridge to address the 'restless' members of the West Works, are wholly typical.

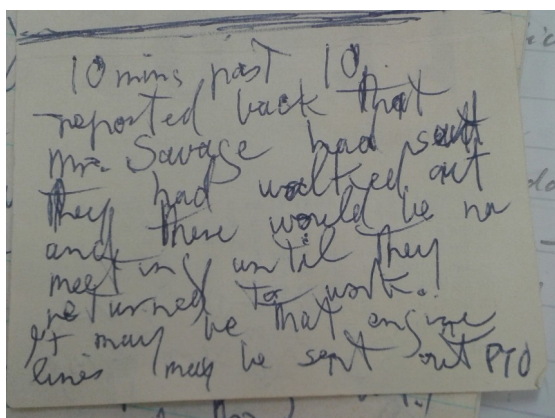


Figure 4: MSS.202/S/J/3/2/68, May 1969.

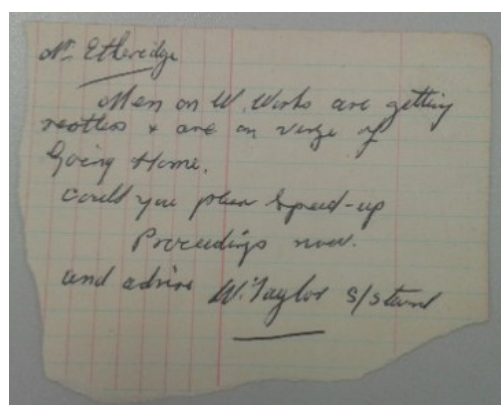


Figure 5: MSS.202/S/J/3/2/69, August 1969.

The rationale by which factory convenors defined which grievances were

---

501 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 92.

“legitimate” shifted according to a changing communicatively-determined consensus, whilst sustaining some general determining values over a longer period. Reflective of many of the ideas discussed in Etheridge's “Austin Standard” in Chapter Three, striking workers generally had to satisfy the convenor that their issue was sufficiently serious and their demands realistic, usually with reference to other groups or past conditions. Most importantly, any action they took had to be justified as unavoidable, either because the issue was so pressing that it required immediate remedy or because they had already tried to solve it through all other available means. This last norm, which stated that strikes had to be a last resort, was a feature of even the most strike-prone workforces, including the supporters of libertarian socialist journal *Solidarity*, who were usually keen to celebrate what they saw as “workers' power”.<sup>502</sup> This idea remained important long after sectional bargaining ended and was a feature of worker discourse into the 1970s and beyond.<sup>503</sup>

Such norms were used to control sectional activism and helped to strike a balance between group autonomy and wider interests, reinforcing the basic ideas of trade unionism as factory leaders saw them. However, they were rarely used to force groups to abandon action. Short of actually replacing striking workers (a total contravention of trade union values prohibiting strikebreaking), there was often little that weak central institutions could do to control determined workgroups. Throughout the mid-1960s the senior stewards at Stoke Aldermoor were frustrated by their inability to control sectional militancy, with AEU convenor Ray Wild at one point pleading with track workers to 'keep their feet on the ground' and reminding them of the proper channels for avoiding disputes.<sup>504</sup> Elsewhere, paint shop workers at Longbridge wrote to

---

502 Ken Weller, *The BLSP Dispute*, p. 25.

503 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 82; Martin Harrison, *TV News*, pp. 231–232.

504 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 April, 2 May, 5 September 1966, 6 March, 2 October 1967; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 December 1967.



their JSSC in May 1966 to complain that a strike by material handlers loading bodies onto their part of the track had caused them to be laid off: 'the shop floor feel that they acted in an undemocratic manner and that they should have to report back asap to stop the same situation arising in future.'<sup>505</sup>

### *Workgroup discipline*

If factory-wide discipline was loose, within the shop it could often be suffocating. Because sectional bargaining derived its legitimacy from intensely personal democratic practices, people who refused to abide by majority decisions were often subjected to bullying and intimidation – a feature of various motor industry scandals, including the “Cowley Moose Trial” (see Chapter Two) which concerned strikebreaking by eight members during a 1-day strike in support of a wage increase at BMC Service (Oxford). The eight were subsequently called to a meeting to account for their actions where it was resolved that they pay a fine to charity and abide by majority decisions in the future. Beyond these sparse details a clear explanation of events is difficult to discern. Although investigations by the TGWU and AEU found no evidence of intimidation, the political importance of the case gave both unions a motivation to clear all concerned, and a number of workers and at least one steward felt moved enough to approach the newspapers.<sup>506</sup> Whatever the precise details, such a meeting was far from unique and reflective of wider social practices. A similar event had occurred at another BMC plant in Theale (Berkshire) the previous year, where workers who had been fined for strikebreaking used the publicity of the Moose Trial to press for their money back.<sup>507</sup>

Although this sort of “closed shop” group discipline was often associated with

---

505 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/67, Letter, 2 Paint Trentham Buildings Stewards to JSSC, 18 May 1966.

506 Paul Hughes, 'Moose Man Reveals His 6m Dossier', *Daily Mirror*, 15 March 1966, p. 1.

507 “Fined” Workers Get Their Money Back', *The Times*, 15 March 1966, p. 10.

“militants”, adherence to union decisions seldom had to be enforced by politicised factory leaders. Indeed, senior stewards often had to secure amicable solutions when ordinary members threatened severe punishments for co-workers who had disobeyed majority votes. Less controversial versions of this kind of dispute emerge in shop-floor documents from other factories. At Longbridge, Etheridge's notes record one example in November 1967: 'Strike in Foundry re: Mrs Davis working while the others were on strike. Ultimately got them to return to work while we discussed the possibility of a move round.'<sup>508</sup> In the face of a refusal to work with the strikebreaker, Etheridge was forced to mediate and arrange a transfer.

In this case the anger had come not from the manipulation of “militant shop stewards” but was a product of the reactions of other members working on Davis' section to her refusal to join them in a common cause. As they saw it, the workers had come to a decision democratically and it was the duty of each member to participate. This concept of a subjectivity in common derived from shared democratic social practices was taken very seriously by many workers, as much on a moral level as on a calculative level, with workers' fury at strikebreaking colleagues often disproportionate to the actual effects of such disloyalty. Punishments reflected the need to perpetuate cultural norms more than material motivations.

### *The difficulties of factory and company level activism*

Alongside the constraints on individuals, shop organisation also imposed limitations on what workers could achieve with their activism. For instance, Henry Friedman's account of the Dagenham strike makes it clear how dependent much of this activity was on key figures. It was stewards Rose Boland and Lil O'Callaghan, leading meetings pre-strike, who brought out the

---

508 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/90, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 29 November 1967.

unfair nature of the new grading system, and throughout the dispute Boland was important, shaping the ideas and actions of the workgroup, making key interventions to secure support from Halewood, and speaking at the NUVB annual conference.<sup>509</sup> Whilst sectional activism provided opportunities to discuss and decide collectively, debates were often framed by stewards. Dependence on the quality of individual activists seems to have been fairly widespread and no doubt contributed to the tendency for militancy to be concentrated only temporarily and in particular sections,<sup>510</sup> with effective collective action often restricted to those shops which happened to have assertive stewards. Consequently, participation in wider debates on workplace life was often mediated and in the absence of a strong factory-wide organisation, ineffective stewards and weakly organised shops were frequently left to their own devices.<sup>511</sup>

Dependence on stewards was not the only limitation imposed by decentralisation. Although sectionalism had helped the sewing machinists organise, their strike went well beyond the conventional constraints of shop organisation, touching on labour relations policies on an industrial and national scale, overtly politicising the issues at stake and forcing the unions, Ford and government to shift their policy positions. However, in general sectional organisation was a clumsy tool for such projects and often struggled to produce coherent policies on matters which couldn't be fixed in the workshop. Equal pay was one of many issues over which factory organisations had been unable to make a significant impact prior to 1968. Even though ending gender discrimination over wages had been official TUC policy since 1955,<sup>512</sup> and equal pay had been a long-standing feature of Ford's annual wage negotiations,<sup>513</sup>

---

509 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 130–152.

510 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, p. 171.

511 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 7 March 1966.

512 "Demand These Claims Be Met in Full".

513 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 87–88.

little progress had been made because officials and management usually assumed there was scant appetite for a dispute over women's wages amongst the workforce. This was an opinion usually borne out on the shop floor and not helped by the lack of representation of women amongst senior stewards.<sup>514</sup> For example, Longbridge JSSC's leaflet on the 1968 engineering industry pay claim made no mention of equal pay, despite it forming part of the union's demands, whilst on Stoke Aldermoor JSSC, stewards actually complained that the second CSEU strike that year was in their estimation about 'just women's wages'.<sup>515</sup>

Gender discrimination was certainly not the only issue on which workers were unable to make significant progress under shop bargaining. Workers who controlled basic conditions at shop level were ill-disposed toward costly industrial action over what they often perceived to be fringe issues. Almost every year, the union's national officers presented Ford with a comprehensive lists of demands, including rights to pensions, training, redundancy pay, holiday entitlements and reduced hours, which were usually sidelined in favour of straight pay demands. In the 1968 CSEU strike mentioned above the Austin JSSC leaflet focused solely on the 15 per cent wage increase, mentioning no other demand.<sup>516</sup> In this regard the absence of effective social practices for producing coherent policies over factory-wide problems was as important as attitudes in determining collective behaviours. Whilst sectionalism gave workers a strong voice in local disputes, with relatively weak wider institutions at factory and industry level, their capacity to affect wider conditions was concomitantly weak.

This, in part, related to the fundamental nature of British trade unions. Charging

---

514 British Leyland had just one woman convenor in this period; Shelagh Conway of SU Carburettors.

515 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 October 1968'; 'RAE, MSS.202/S/J/4/1, Austin Longbridge Joint Shop Stewards Committee, "The Engineers Wage Claim" (handbill), 1968'.

516 "The Engineering Wage Claim".

low subscription fees, and employing relatively few full-time officers (who were often appointed rather than elected) workers frequently had to resort to letters, petitions and lobbying in order to influence them.<sup>517</sup> Thus, small in number and sometimes immune to the entreaties of members, officers were often imperfect means by which to build broader social connections.<sup>518</sup> Low member participation in forums orientated toward the wider union further exacerbated the problem. *The Affluent Worker* noted that just 4 per cent of the workers they surveyed at Vauxhall regularly attended branch meetings,<sup>519</sup> meaning most workers absented themselves from the processes by which formal union policy was made.

Even in-factory organisations were often weaker than they appeared. Although incidents like the “Noose Trial” were used by policy makers and newspaper commentators to imply that shop stewards’ committees wielded tyrannical power over the lives of workers, in this period factory organisations were usually unable to engage in mass action, a fact reflected in strike statistics, which showed virtually no large sustained car factory disputes between 1960 and 1968.<sup>520</sup> In some cases this was simply because no well-attended forum for discussing and generalising attitudes existed. At Cowley for instance, the JSSC had an intermittent role in the second half of the 1960s, only meeting on a quarterly basis, attracting relatively few stewards, and even cancelling two inquorate meetings in 1968.<sup>521</sup> Similar problems occurred at Stoke, where average attendance for their JSSC meetings was just 60 in 1966 (less than half later averages), with the consequence that senior stewards regularly

---

517 Wrigley, *British Trade Unions since 1933*, p. 35; Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, pp. 27–30.

518 Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, pp. 166–167.

519 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 98–99.

520 R.A. Hart, Evaluation of United Kingdom Engineering Strikes, 1920-1970 [computer File]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], June 2008. SN: 5841, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5841-1>.

521 Modern Records Centre, Coventry, British Leyland Trade Union Committee Papers [Hereafter BLTUC], MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Meeting Agenda, April 1968.

complained about members refusing to follow instructions, not just related to wildcat strikes, but also to overtime working and even to excessive use of the grievance procedure.<sup>522</sup>

In terms of scrutinising senior figures, convenors, by now often full-time union representatives, were usually elected by assemblies of their union's stewards, so these ill-attended JSSC and branch meetings meant members could subject them to little oversight. At Longbridge in May 1965, only 27 members contested a JSSC vote in May 1965, leaving around 600 sections unrepresented and unable to influence events on a factory-wide basis.<sup>523</sup> Those sections, could, in theory, have replaced the existing steward with a more assiduous character, but the JSSC as a body would still have lacked influence. Moreover, if a steward did a good job on their section but was inactive in wider union business, it was unlikely that members would be motivated to replace them. As a result, worker-influence over wider issues and decision-making at factory level was at best indirect and at worst virtually non-existent.

### *The scope of sectional discussion*

With the locus of solidarity lying with workgroups rather than the factory workforce as a whole, issues outside everyday concerns like pensions and holidays were either sidelined or dealt with by a small clique of senior activists. At Stoke for instance, the stewards didn't begin discussing the need for a pension scheme until 1970, when a special sub-committee was established to investigate, those responsible would not report for a further two years, and ordinary members appear to have had little involvement in the process.<sup>524</sup> Company planning and investment (and the resultant labour requirements)

---

522 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 June 1966.

523 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/11i, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 May 1965.

524 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 March 1970; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/3, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 January 1972.

were equally outside the members' frame of reference, as was state policy toward the motor industry. Moreover, with workers focused on sectional activism and eschewing participation in more outwardly-focused union structures, engagement in either formal politics or community activism was also restricted to a minority.<sup>525</sup> Community activism in particular became increasingly difficult to sustain, as rising personal car ownership spread workers more thinly across different areas, making the connections between the works and particular neighbourhoods less obvious.<sup>526</sup> Whilst factory organisation may have been sufficient to bring together otherwise disparate workers at times of crisis (usually when redundancies were threatened), generally the workforce struggled to maintain a constant influence over any wider themes.

Such constraints also meant that sectional organisations often struggled to produce coherent policies even on straightforward “industrial issues”. Although Beynon paints a picture of the Halewood stewards in the late 1960s as highly activist and very effective at producing clear ideas, in 1967 and 1968 the stewards were unable to produce any kind of effective policy in response to the company's new grading scheme.<sup>527</sup> At Stoke Aldermoor, even when presented with such a dramatic and potentially damaging change to their existing rights as the introduction of MDW and job evaluation, the JSSC struggled to produce coherent policies.

First mentioned in February 1967, the stewards engaged in little further discussion of the scheme over the following months, despite the stewards finding time for a special meeting to discuss the company's inadequate

---

525 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 131.

526 For instance the proportion of Oxford-based car workers at the three Cowley plants drops from 77 per cent in 1946 to just 36 per cent in 1981, see: Ward and others, ‘Cowley in the Oxford Economy’ p. 80. Community activism was in any case comparatively rare even in the earlier period, although hints of it can be seen in Dagenham workers' opposition to evictions in South Essex in the mid-1940s, see: Halpin, *Memoirs*, p. 25.

527 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 167.

compensation for “waiting time” - a problem that would disappear when it came in.<sup>528</sup> Not until nine months after their initial discussions did the stewards finally meet for a full discussion (attendance at which was described as 'appalling'), and even then, stewards were prohibited from discussing the plan with the wider membership. Wider discussion of the new wage structure would not take place until the first full wage agreement in May 1968 when an early version of the document was leaked by management against the wishes of the convenor. The lack of opposition at Stoke reflected less the material realities of the plan, which involved a major curtailment of rights and would certainly have been sufficient to provoke a major dispute at other factories and other times, and more the culture of the workforce at that particular historical moment. With a relatively inactive and conflict-averse leadership, it was difficult to produce a collective definition of MDW with which to stimulate resistance.

Beyond such “industrial issues”, restraints were even greater. Senior stewards' awareness of the conditional trust that had been placed in them, and the likelihood that their positions would be heavily scrutinised for “political motivations”,<sup>529</sup> often reinforced norms that prevented forms of activism outside pre-prescribed limits. In some cases these norms were expressed through rules strictly limiting the content of discussions on JSSCs, explicitly excluding issues that were “political”. This reflected a more general ideological separation between the discrete areas of politics (as in party politics and formal doctrine) and “industrial issues”, which separated legitimate and illegitimate activities in most factory activism.<sup>530</sup> The BMC Combine Committee's constitution explicitly articulated this, describing the committee as 'strictly non-political' and 'not to be used for the furtherance of political objects'.<sup>531</sup> Similar rules also featured of the

---

528 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 13 March 1967.

529 Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, pp. 197–199.

530 Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, pp. 215–217.

531 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Constitution and Standing Orders, Undated.



constitutions of both Cowley AEU Shop Steward Committee<sup>532</sup> and the anonymised factory featured in Batstone *et al's Shop Stewards in Action*.<sup>533</sup>

Such norms undoubtedly made campaigns about race relations or gender (which were coded as political issues) more difficult, and in combination with the prevalence of generally racist and sexist attitudes goes some way towards explaining why collective bargaining over these issues was so rare.<sup>534</sup> Despite the long-standing involvement of the Longbridge JSSC in anti-racist politics (expressed in support for campaigns relating to South Africa, Zimbabwe and US civil rights), engagement in this sphere was almost always restricted to the fraction of overtly political stewards, who attended conferences or demonstrations, but who rarely attempted to push such politics within the factory. Even in more practical matters, negotiations with management reveal a reluctance to deal with industrial grievances that touched on race relations. Discussing a protest put forward by the (majority Afro-Caribbean) East Works labourers in 1967, the works committee, whilst agreeing *off the record* that black workers were excluded from better jobs because of a supposed lack of “suitability” for fast-paced production, joined management in denying the existence of a colour bar.<sup>535</sup> Whether or not the Longbridge leadership genuinely believed the manifestly racist trope that semi-skilled production work was beyond their members from the Caribbean and South Asia, they were certainly unenthusiastic about having an open debate on the issue.

---

532 Shop stewards in some factories constituted separate committees for each union. Where this is the case the initialisation SSC will be used in place of JSSC.

533 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly AEU Shop Stewards' Committee Standing Orders, 19 April 1966; Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, p. 220.

534 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 116.

535 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/86, Agendas and Papers of Austin Longbridge JSSC and Works Committee, July 1967.

## *The uses of shop bargaining*

Sectional bargaining struggled at times either to deal with broad industrial policy, or to facilitate significant political change for marginal groups. However, contrary to the idea of union fragmentation central to much of the historiography, it still persisted for positive reasons. Workers' social practices and cultural norms were seen to be an increasingly easy means by which pressure could be put on employers to treat them more fairly, with workers using them to gain more control over everything from health and safety to sickness and disability. On occasion the same practices could also produce *indirect* political effects, with partial disputes like the Dagenham sewing machinists' strike shaping government legislation and prompting similar disputes elsewhere.<sup>536</sup> Motor industry strikes also inadvertently contributed to other pro-worker legislation like the 1964 Redundancy Act, which introduced statutory entitlements to redundancy pay for the first time, largely in response to previous strikes over the issue.<sup>537</sup> Having developed over the previous decade on the basis of the workgroup, 1960s labour relations allowed sections to sustain substantial sectional autonomy, allowing for small-scale democratic interventions, and even encouraging marginalised groups to offer some challenge to less obviously industrial issues like gender and racial discrimination.

However, this new social power was not without its costs. Companies rarely conceded new rights on a statutory basis and better conditions usually had to be won through a combination of effective steward leadership and a level of group unity that was often accompanied by strong discipline. Disputes, when

---

536 Chris Wrigley, 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions', in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol.2 : The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 43–69 (p. 57).

537 Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 111; Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, pp. 385–387.

they occurred, were also usually costly to both strikers and laid-off non-participants. However hard senior stewards and factory organisations tried to control the use of sectional social power, the result of industrial action by minorities was often widespread hardship. Generally speaking, official trade unions and factory organisations were both weak on wider issues during this period and struggled to solve problems that went beyond the immediate concerns of the workshop.

By refusing to take the capacity to act collectively for granted and actively looking in detail at how power operated at work, we can begin to see how it shaped the development of workplace life. The nature of the organisations that workers had created structured the workplace as a *habitus*, partially determining both what workers talked about and how they talked about it. Such observations, following the central argument of this thesis, belie the simplistic way in which economic motivations are often used to explain collective action. The way in which self-interest operated for workers in the post-war motor industry was *a priori* structured by their workplace cultures, which largely determined who was and who was not included in their definitions of “we”.

Whatever the limitations of mid-1960s sectionalism, it is clear that the social power car workers wielded reshaped their social relations and the forms of domination which confronted them at work. These forms, rather than being simple industrial dysfunction or fragmentation, were a product of historical activism, and represented a realistic strategy for generating democratic social power in the workplace and effecting change in the world around them. In the final years of the 1960s, the success of sectional groups in winning new social rights would bring a response from employers, who now looked to incorporate low-level bargaining into their industrial relations structures, while displacing conflictual elements of bargaining away from shop level toward factory and company bargaining. This attempt, in the face of a rising share for labour of the

value produced by the industry in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>538</sup> to restore managerial control through what we, following Beverley Silver, might call an “organisational fix”, would require a new effort on the part of factory leaders, stewards and members to create institutions and social practices capable of generating communicative consensus on a broader basis. The ways in which they did so reflected both the historical effects of two decades of organisation, and the agency of new generations of workers.

### **“Regaining control by sharing it” : 1968-75**

In 1967 Ford completed a two-year process of reform to its wage structure. The company had sent industrial engineers to measure every job in the company, grading each in terms of skill, exertion and responsibility. This information was then passed to a joint committee of managers and stewards in order to place jobs in five grades. After two decades of trying to restrict the involvement of their workforce in company decisions, such “co-management” was a departure for Ford, which now resolved to ‘regain control by sharing it’.<sup>539</sup> This new attempt to restore order to the ‘jungle of restrictive practices, inefficiencies, and unconstitutional behaviour’<sup>540</sup> on the shop floor reflected changing attitudes in the motor industry more generally. In response to the increasingly disruptive effects of sectional activism, employers and trade unions resolved to adopt “productivity bargaining” (as discussed in Chapter Two), moving towards a model where wage increases and formal rights were exchanged for co-operation with modernisation programmes in a new effort to win worker consent for productivity increases. Friction would be further eased by the hiring of large numbers of personnel managers to facilitate these changes.<sup>541</sup>

---

538 Sue Bowden, James Foreman-Peck and Tom Richardson, ‘The Post-War Productivity Failure : Insights from Oxford (Cowley)’, *Business History*, 43 (2001), 54–78 (p. 58).

539 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 77.

540 Ford Labour Director Leslie Blakeman, cited in Tolliday, ‘Ford and “Fordism”’, p. 89.

541 Howard F. Gospel, ‘The Management of Labour’, in *A History of British Industrial Relations*,

At British-owned firms, Rootes in 1968 and BL in 1972, the first step in this direction was the introduction of MDW as employers urgently attempted to abolish a piecework system that was becoming increasingly disruptive as workers became more adept at shop-floor bargaining.<sup>542</sup> Even at firms where MDW had been in place for many years, the late 1960s saw reform. In addition to new grading structures, managers instituted new procedure agreements designed to mitigate conflict, raise productivity, increase flexibility, abolish “restrictive practices” and generally formalise shop-floor bargaining. At Vauxhall these new objectives were expressed in their draft 1969 annual agreement, which proposed a permanent night shift, tighter timekeeping and discipline and a “no strike” agreement, in exchange for office facilities for the stewards and check-off (automatic deduction of union dues from pay slips).<sup>543</sup>

These developments coincided with a marked deterioration in the financial position of Britain’s four large motor firms, with their global market share significantly eroding. By 1970, total UK car production had been surpassed by Germany, France, Italy and Japan,<sup>544</sup> with output and profits declining in all four major firms from 1972.<sup>545</sup> This increased the pressure on managers to raise productivity, as they looked to efficiency savings to reduce costs and rationalise plants and workforces. As demand crashed and import penetration intensified, short-time and lay-offs became regular concerns for workers. For activists these new circumstances created both new grievances and new organisational questions. As Chrysler’s unchallenged imposition of MDW at Stoke

---

*1939-1979: Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 84–106 (pp. 88, 94).

542 Cliff, *The Employers Offensive*, pp. 46–50; James Foreman-Peck, Sue Bowden and Alan McKinley, *The British Motor Industry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 172–173.

543 Ken Weller, ‘Vauxhall: Militants Beware’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, May 1969, 17–20 (p. 20).

544 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 94–95.

545 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 110.

demonstrates, many shop stewards' organisations were ill-equipped to react coherently to wide-scale industrial-level reforms. Moreover, much of their social power was based on sectional wage militancy that would largely disappear under MDW, with its annual agreements over wages. Productivity bargaining, formal procedure agreements, government intervention, threatened closures and mass redundancy, all of these problems implied the need to develop a factory politics with new cultural norms and social practices.

As a consequence this period involved innovation from activists, as they looked to create a shared interest for a factory-wide audience in the face of industrial relations reforms driven by capital and the state. Building on their existing, sectionally-based, organisations, such developments encouraged shop stewards' organisations to demand greater discipline from their members, potentially endangering the small-scale democracy and autonomy which had been the defining feature of the previous period of organising. In the second part of this chapter, I will look at how worker activists attempted to reconcile these different demands, arguing that the new forms of organisation which emerged in this period were structured by the agency of car workers and the histories of their particular workplaces and shop-floor institutions, as well as by the arrival of new generations of workers, to produce a variety of new social and cultural forms, which profoundly shaped responses to economic restructuring during this period.

### *New social practices at Ford Halewood and elsewhere*

As I noted with regard to the emergence of sectional bargaining over the course of the 1950s, the changing forms of worker organisation and collective behaviour in post-war Britain have been comparatively neglected in much of the literature. This is also true for the late 1960s and 1970s. Although the rising importance of large official strikes has not gone unnoticed, explanations for

changes in behaviour have, as for other periods, largely been explained as a result of changing economic circumstances, with higher strike levels attributed primarily to the rising cost of living.<sup>546</sup> Addison, for instance, explains the 1968 to 1974 strike wave as follows:

*It came to be taken for granted that every year would bring with it an increase in the GDP and a rise in the purchasing power of real incomes. Meanwhile the number of strikes and stoppages multiplied as the expectation rose that they would succeed.*<sup>547</sup>

For Addison, a combination of economic circumstances and a generational shift in attitudes is adequate explanation for increased industrial conflict, but in making such assertions about worker attitudes, he deems it unnecessary either to consult any actual workers or to explain how it was that their organisations were suddenly capable of such substantial disruption. For those of us interested in how workers went about organising collective action there is scant more detail to be found in the work of many labour historians; Henry Pelling is particularly conspicuous in his lack of interest in shop-floor detail, attributing the upturn to a combination of industrial relations policies and inflation.<sup>548</sup>

Once again, the connection between economic developments and collective action is taken as a given. Yet as our detailed discussion of sectional bargaining amply illustrates, bringing about strikes of any kind involved a complex process that depended on adequate social and cultural resources. As we have seen, by the 1960s, workers had developed the capacity to regularly engage in sectional activism, but often struggled to even properly discuss

---

546 E.W. Evans and S.W. Creigh, 'Work Stoppages - the British Experience: Strikes', in *Industrial Conflict in Britain*, ed. by E.W. Evans and S.W. Creigh (London: Cass, 1977), pp. 1–20 (pp. 6–14).

547 Addison, *No Turning Back*, p. 188.

548 Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 269.

factory issues, let alone respond to them. The shift in gear from generating large numbers of sectional disputes to organising strikes covering whole factories or even entire companies, of the sort that became commonplace from 1968 onwards, was in itself a substantial development, which requires greater reflection. How did workers go about augmenting the collective capacities of their organisations, such that large strikes became a reasonable course of action, and how did that affect the workplace as a *habitus*?

Beynon and Darlington provide us with some idea of what that process looked like at Ford Halewood. Beynon describes in detail the build-up to and prosecution of a unprecedented national strike in 1969, involving 38,000 workers across 7 factories, spread from Southampton to South Liverpool. The strike began with national union representatives reaching agreement with Ford, as they had done successfully every year since 1952. Reflecting the new world of productivity bargaining, the agreement included a number of “strings”, most notably an offer of increased holiday pay in exchange for continuous working and good timekeeping, which many Ford workers thought restricted their ability to defend their collective rights.<sup>549</sup> The workers' activism around the deal *also* reflected a new world. For years the union side of the National Joint Negotiating Committee, comprised of full-time officers nominated by 22 unions, had negotiated with little input from shop-floor activists. However, in 1969 at Halewood the stewards were active months in advance of negotiations, promoting a militant push for wage increases through shop meetings, leaflets, newspapers and mass meetings.<sup>550</sup> The final result of this activism was a mass membership predisposed to listen when stewards advocated a wildcat strike. Similar processes had taken place at other Ford factories, which followed Halewood out on a strike that would last for a month and eventually see the defeat of the so-called “penalty clauses”.<sup>551</sup>

---

549 Cohen, *Notoriously Militant*, pp. 92–96; Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 256.

550 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 255–257.

551 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 281–286.



From 1968 onwards, this sort of strike became more common in the motor industry with the number of “major strikes” (totalling more than 5000 striker days) rising from 100 between 1962 and 1967 to 264 between 1968 and 1973.<sup>552</sup> Alongside this new found capacity to engage in regular mass strikes, workers retained their old tendency to engage in small strikes, which also substantially increased in frequency during this period.<sup>553</sup> Finally, new forms of activism emerged, with car workers participating in the majority of the 19 nationwide political strikes organised between 1969 and 1974, and adopting newly militant policies, including in many cases the promise to effect factory occupations in the event of redundancies.<sup>554</sup>

These changes *were* in part prompted by the changing external political and economic conditions discussed above, as the imposition of productivity bargaining created new forms of conflict. However, as Stoke's reaction to MDW illustrates, there was no easy transition from new problems to mass action. Contrary to their later reputation for militancy,<sup>555</sup> in the summer of 1968, the Halewood stewards were in 'disarray' with many activists worrying about the state of organisation at the plant. Frustrated at a lack of leadership during an overtime ban (called over the 1968 annual wage negotiations), workers in convenor Mick Donnelly's department resolved to change stewards at the next

---

552 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 318.

553 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, p. 317.

554 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/164, Thornycroft Joint Unions Occupation Committee, “Appeal” (handbill), March 1972; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/4, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1 December 1975; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 18 December 1973.

555 The strike-prone reputation of the three car factories on Merseyside – BL Speke, Ford Halewood and Ellesmere Port Vauxhall – has often combined in memories of the period to create an stereotype of the “militant scouser”. However, although all three factories were protagonists in large strikes, in fact many Ellesmere Port workers hailed from Cheshire rather than Liverpool, and generally speaking the militancy of the city has been exaggerated. Motor industry strikes don't seem to conform to any particular regional patterns. See: Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, p. 8; Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, pp. 321-322.

election, making Donnelly ineligible for the convenorship. He was replaced by the more dynamic Eddie Roberts, a move that reflected a general shift in the activities of the JSSC.<sup>556</sup> They now began to use their branch as a means of influencing the union, producing papers and leaflets, and setting up shop meetings and mass meetings as a way of communicating with members.<sup>557</sup> Alongside these organisational changes, there were corresponding attempts to restrict sectional activism in order to improve unity. In Roberts' words: 'we were tearing ourselves apart in that plant in 1968. When I became convenor I knew that I had to get the plant together again. Pulling together. I worked at it and I think I can take some credit for it because we bloody well did start to pull the same way again.'<sup>558</sup>

In the late 1960s the Halewood stewards reinforced the authority of their JSSC, enabling them to bargain more effectively at national level. Two by products of this were the improvement in their capacity to sustain factory-wide strikes over a number of weeks, and the increasingly important role that official trade unions conceded to convenors in negotiations, with senior stewards invited to participate directly in national bargaining.<sup>559</sup> Another change was the increased authority that stewards now wielded over the workforce. Whilst in 1969 this had promoted militant action, in the 1970s the assembly plant leadership became increasingly conservative and wedded to procedure, exercising firmer control over the activities of their stewards and members.<sup>560</sup> This behaviour eventually produced the unexpected consequence of pushing more radical activists into establishing a rank-and-file group to fight wage claims.<sup>561</sup>

Elsewhere, these new organisational and social challenges produced different

---

556 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 232–241.

557 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 285–286.

558 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 246.

559 Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 197–198.

560 Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 207–209.

561 Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 251–252.

responses. Batstone *et al* describe an alternative scenario unfolding at another – anonymised – motor industry factory. There the stewards developed one JSSC for the entire site (rather than the 3 at Halewood), which appears to have had more formal authority than the Halewood committees, with stewards often cited reluctantly declaring during discussion that they were 'tied by the JSSC resolution'.<sup>562</sup> Another distinctive feature of the Batstone factory's committee related to its constitution, which included a ban on discussion of wider "political" issues - a backlash against various unsuccessful interventions by the CPGB in the 1950s. Such attitudes no doubt contributed to the parochialism which characterised activism there, producing a moribund union branch that rarely engaged in wider union issues, with 51 per cent of the stewards agreeing that 'the union is the stewards and members in this company'.<sup>563</sup>

Batstone *et al*'s account makes it clear that shop-floor life was shaped by historical forces, producing a distinctive regime. As at Halewood, after years of relatively successful sectional bargaining, the stewards and their committees remained at the heart of negotiations, and as the new organisation entered the 1970s, union members settled on the factory JSSC as the most appropriate body for reconciling sectional interests with factory policies. Conversely, external relations were largely determined by past experience, with defeat under a previous Communist-led regime fuelling cynicism towards engagement with politics and the wider union movement. Whilst we can find some continuities across the motor industry, these two factories weren't alone in adopting idiosyncratic organising styles. Even the JSSC, the beating heart of shop-floor trade unionism at both, were of little significance at Jaguar or Ellesmere Port Vauxhall.<sup>564</sup> In other spheres, in relations with the trade union

---

562 Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *Shop Stewards in Action*, p. 78.

563 Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, *Shop Stewards in Action*, pp. 180–184.

564 R.W. Shakespeare, 'Vauxhall Hopes of Restart Today', *The Times*, 10 March 1969, p. 17; R.W. Shakespeare, 'Crucial Strike Talks Today at Vauxhall', *The Times*, 31 March 1970, p. 17; R.W. Shakespeare, 'New Labour Troubles for Motor Industry', *The Times*, 5 January 1971, p. 5; Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 221.

bureaucracy for instance, we find evidence of further variety. Whilst at Cowley body, local official Dave Buckle enjoyed an excellent relationship with a JSSC that was well-organised, constitutionalist and moderate, within Ellesmere Port AEU relations between activists and full-time officers were more strained and in 1969, national official Norman McDonald came away from one mass meeting with cuts and bruises after workers in favour of continuing to work to rule objected to his intervention and stormed the platform.<sup>565</sup>

This variety, in institutions, social practices and cultural norms reflects both the origins of shop-floor organisations (which, as we saw in Chapter Three, were created through uneven processes) and the input of the younger workers who entered the industry in the 1960s. Such factors ensured that even when groups were confronted with similar economic problems they often used very different means to arrive at solutions. The forces at work in these social processes and the ways in which they shaped activism and daily life in individual car factories can be seen in the divergent experiences of workers at the four factories I will be discuss in detail in this section: Rootes Stoke Aldermoor, Austin Longbridge, Morris Cowley and Rover Solihull. All originally British-owned piecework factories located in the industry's West Midlands heartland, their experiences are revealing of the forces at play in the development of militancy in this period – particularly the difficulties involved in their attempts to move from sectional to factory activism, whilst reconciling the contradictory demands of discipline, solidarity, autonomy and democracy.

### *Stoke Aldermoor - a “parliamentary democracy”*

Stoke Aldermoor car works in South East Coventry was built during the war, later becoming a car assembly plant, then finally converting to engine production in the 1960s. In 1967 Chrysler began a takeover, eventually buying

---

<sup>565</sup> R.W. Shakespeare, 'Bitterness Grows in Car Disputes: Short Time at Cowley', *The Times*, 24 October 1969, p. 21.

out the entire company, and retiring the Rootes name in 1971. However, logistical problems and low productivity meant weak profits, and the company was subject to a government bailout in 1975.<sup>566</sup> Despite the travails of its owners, the experiences of the Rootes-Chrysler workforce were not entirely negative. Although from 1968 onwards their wages lagged slightly behind those at BL, the total number of employees remained stable at around 5-6,000.<sup>567</sup>

The basic pattern of shop-floor activism at Stoke was established by the early 1960s. Most of the workers were in four unions - the NUVB, AEU, TGWU and the Electrical Trades Union - and the majority of decision-making took place on the JSSC, which met for a two-hour meeting in the factory social club on the first Monday morning of every month. Unlike the much larger Longbridge stewards organisation, Stoke had no inquorate meetings between 1966 and 1979, and average attendances rose steadily until a round of redundancies in 1975.<sup>568</sup> In terms of its operation, the Stoke JSSC had a conventional set of formal rules – standing orders – stipulating debating norms. Meetings followed the most common trade union format, beginning with a reading of the previous meeting's minutes, followed by matters arising, then correspondence and convenors' reports, with any excess time allocated to “any other business”, consisting of items added to the agenda at least 10 days prior to the meeting.<sup>569</sup> Meetings were conducted by two officers, the chairman and the secretary, with the former tasked with interpreting the standing orders and both responsible for preparing meeting agendas. Factory leadership lay with the convenors of the different unions, elected by steward or branch meetings of their particular organisation. These convenors, together with their deputies and the JSSC officers, formed the “negotiating committee”, the executive body of the factory

---

566 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 212–215.

567 Tony Cliff, *Chrysler Workers: The Fight for a Future* (London: Socialist Worker, 1979), p. 18.

568 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1-5, Rootes-Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1966-1979.

569 CUK, MSS.315/A/3/2, Humber Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Standing Orders, Undated.

union movement.

This was a conventional way of organising, with a JSSC constitution broadly similar to those described elsewhere and with the standard executive committee of convenors.<sup>570</sup> However, the way in which the Stoke stewards used these institutions and the social practices that arose around them were distinctive and changed according to shifts in personnel, as well as in political and economic contexts. As we have seen, despite Rootes being a relatively peaceful firm in the 1960s,<sup>571</sup> between 1966 and 1968 the leadership of the JSSC struggled to impose sectional discipline on the workforce and *laissez faire* attitude had enabled some work groups to exert control over wages and conditions. The advent of MDW meant wages could no longer be improved section-by-section and the factory organisation *had* to take more responsibility for negotiations. Thus from 1969, the Stoke JSSC became more pro-active at factory level. Previously largely mere administrators, convenors Wild and Nelson became increasingly involved in complex negotiations and in making recommendations to their stewards and members.



Figure 6: Mass meeting on Stoke Green (Coventry Evening Telegraph, 19 June 1973).

This was most noticeable in routines that emerged around the negotiation of annual agreements. In place of the chaos that surrounded the original MDW proposal, the Stoke stewards now adopted a new social practice, electing a

---

<sup>570</sup> Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, p. 192.

<sup>571</sup> Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 218.

special “negotiating team” with members representing different sections of the workforce. Further discussions would be held after the first round of talks, with stewards voting on which aspects to re-negotiate. Finally when stewards felt the discussions could go no further they would call a mass meeting, and all members would gather at Stoke Green (see *Figure 6*), a local park, to listen to senior stewards report back before finally voting on a recommendation from the platform by show-of-hands.<sup>572</sup> Such patterns were extended to other areas of importance to the membership like new procedure agreements or job security.<sup>573</sup>

As these frequent opportunities to discuss and debate imply, the JSSC was a forum for relatively open debates during this period. Although the convenors elected between 1968 and 1975 were generally moderate figures, discussions between shop stewards always featured a variety of opinions and frequently finished with robust arguments and competitive votes. Already a lively arena for debate by the mid-1960s, attendance rose substantially between 1966 and 1975<sup>574</sup> as a new generation of stewards emerged, including an overtly politicised minority organised around a handful of members of the International Socialists [IS].<sup>575</sup> In this regard Stoke contradicts the implication made by both Pelling and Laybourn that apathy tended to suit marginal political groups,<sup>576</sup> in that it was only in conjunction with rising attendance that IS secured a modest foothold. Despite being small in number (14 in 1971<sup>577</sup>), their leading member, John Worth, was popular enough to command the support of half the stewards

---

572 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 February, 31 March 1969; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 5 April, 7 May 1971.

573 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 7 September, 30 November 1970.

574 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1-5, Rootes-Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1966-1979.

575 An unorthodox Leninist organisation, which focused on rank-and-file organising amongst students and workers. It was the forerunner of the modern Socialist Workers Party.

576 Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 238–239; Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 176–177.

577 McIlroy, ‘Always Outnumbered’, p. 272.

in a JSSC election in 1970 and became deputy AEU convenor.<sup>578</sup>

The IS branch was a product of the changing nature of shop-floor politics at Stoke. In the earlier period, the factory's more conservative union leaders made little effort to cultivate activists, and left more militant sections to their own devices. However, as the factory leadership became more pro-active, they required more participation. Simultaneously, as intervention in sectional disputes became more regular, members increasingly demanded stewards who would act forcefully on the JSSC in defence of their interests. Confronted by new stewards with stronger policy preferences, the more conservative convenors were also "politicised"; forced to define their positions in more detail and advance more convincing arguments. Subsequently, as the stewards committee began to focus on a greater range of factory issues and became a more important site of decision-making, the type of discussions they had began to change and debates became structured around competing propositions of varying degrees of militancy.

Such debate had its advantages and disadvantages for Stoke workers. As an open body the JSSC continued to act as a consistent brake on the authority of the convenors, who on more than one occasion lost committee votes.<sup>579</sup> Meeting minutes document plenty of opportunities for stewards to raise their ideas and the concerns of their constituents, which encouraged new activists into the organisation. Similarly, although both the militant and moderate factions did try to exert more authority, factional politics tended to reaffirm a tendency dating from the mid-1960s, where stewards voted with their conscience or their mandate; in effect, a JSSC vote was binding on a convenor, and a mass meeting vote was binding on everybody: the parliament above the executive, and the people above all.

---

578 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 2 February 1970.

579 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/3, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 26 November, 13 December 1971, 2 March, 22 June 1972.



Such open arrangements could be divisive however, and the stewards occasionally found themselves losing mass-meeting strike votes because discipline had broken down and one or other steward had argued against the recommendation from the platform.<sup>580</sup> Senior stewards looked to quash some tendencies towards disunity using bureaucratic methods to restrict or control discussion, such as in March 1972, when steward R. Brooks was reported to his branch for misconduct, after attempting to move an illegal amendment at a mass meeting.<sup>581</sup> On other occasions, the JSSC Chair ruled resolutions critical of the leadership out of order and refused to answer questions on awkward disciplinary cases.<sup>582</sup> Outside meetings, there were attempts to control both the messages coming from the JSSC and the agitational propaganda of opposition factions, and in 1970, a first attempt was made to suppress a leaflet distributed within the factory by a group of workers.<sup>583</sup> The earlier permissive attitude towards sectional disputes began to disappear and problems relating to working conditions, management and discipline become a more frequent topic for discussion. Whereas earlier the vast majority of sectional disputes had been left to resolve themselves, convenors now raised these conflicts (at a rate of five per week) in their reports, with votes and resolutions offering support or demanding strikers return to work, potentially facilitating easier victories or bringing an end to unpopular strikes that were causing lay-offs elsewhere in the factory.<sup>584</sup>

The increasing importance of the JSSC in shop-floor politics both enabled and constrained the agency of union members. The open nature of the JSSC meant

---

580 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/4, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Special Meeting Minutes, 25 June 1976; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/4, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 10 January 1977.

581 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/3, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 14 March 1972.

582 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/3, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 5 June 1972, 4 March 1974.

583 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 March 1970.

584 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1969.

that workers could plausibly send representatives to meetings and expect them to affect decisions, even if the leadership remained relatively static. The convening of mass meetings also granted the membership a consistent and final veto on any policy that required active participation. Contrary to the narrative explored in Chapter Two, such meetings were by no means a walkover for the stewards, and between 1970 and 1975 they seem to have lost as many as they won.<sup>585</sup> Finally, as the members pushed forward more active stewards the JSSC looked to offer more leadership in policy and action, vital for the new world of productivity bargaining. In the process the membership did lose some of their former autonomy and became increasingly dependent on the factory organisation. This meant that shop meetings became spheres for delegation more than decision-making. Mass meetings, revolving around an address from leaders and a vote on a recommendation, were in some ways an inadequate replacement for the intimate two-way conversation of small workgroups. Regardless, the JSSC, the negotiating committee and the shop meeting provided an adequate if complicated means by which the workers at Stoke could formulate policy and react to change. Stoke attempted, and partially succeeded, in reconciling the contradictions of discipline, unity, democracy and autonomy.

### *Rover Solihull - Departmental constituencies and senior steward authority*

After World War Two Rover positioned itself as a modestly-sized manufacturer of upmarket saloon cars and utility vehicles. Initially based in Coventry, the company expanded across the West Midlands during the war, building factories in Solihull and Birmingham, with the former eventually becoming the main

---

<sup>585</sup> In this regard they were not alone. Accounts at both Cowley Assembly and Halewood also record the stewards losing important mass meetings. See: Mathews, *Ford Strike*, p. 77; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 45-46.

assembly factory. Despite being comparatively successful, dependence on external body-building facilities saw Rover caught up in the 1960s mergers, bought by Leyland-Triumph in 1967 and subsequently incorporated into British Leyland. Rover's industrial relations prior to this period were not particularly fractious and (depending on their politics) activists there recalled the 1960s as a period of either moderation or disorganisation and both sides agreed that by the early 1970s substantial changes in shop-floor organisation had made for a more active union.<sup>586</sup>

Following the TGWU takeover of the NUVB, almost all the factory's 4,500 workers had been brought into one union branch: 5/357;<sup>587</sup> but, every-day decision-making rested elsewhere, with two TGWU stewards committees, one for the production stewards and another for the indirects. With far higher attendances than the theoretically more open branch meetings, these committees were where the majority of information was shared, where decisions were taken over both annual negotiations and everyday issues, and where the leadership did their best to organise their stewards and members.

As at Stoke, the particular history of their organisation and the influence of new personnel were vitally important to how the stewards' committee went about re-thinking their social practices in response to new economic and political conditions. Although meetings of the production stewards' committee adopted the same format as their Rootes-Chrysler counterparts – minutes, matters arising etc. – the content and social practices on display were shaped by the modes of communicative action peculiar to these workers. Their inaugural meeting on 23 May 1972 was fairly typical. The stewards established the committee by voting to follow 'normal standing orders', before electing veteran

---

586 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/10, Martin Kavanagh Interview, 21 February 1982; Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979.

587 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/7/1, TGWU Branch 5/357 Meeting Minutes, 19 July 1960 to 28 August 1977.

left-winger Mick Clarke as the chair. They then proceeded to reports from five different “senior stewards”, four representing the different production lines then operating at Rover – Land Rover, Range Rover, P6 and P5 – and one, Joe Harris, representing the whole plant. Issues covered included supply problems, working conditions, line speed, movement of labour, pay claims and the effects of absenteeism.<sup>588</sup> Information was relayed to the 51 assembled stewards, but in contrast to Stoke, no intervention by any ordinary steward merited inclusion in the minutes. A meeting on the 6 June followed a similar pattern, with various reports generating just two questions.<sup>589</sup> Alongside the lack of questions, we find less dissent, with the minutes recording no complaints levelled against the union organisation between May and December. In fact, in the absence of meaningful debate, and with just two competitive votes in 8 months of meetings, it is difficult to gauge the level of support for committee policy. Such a level of consensus seems astonishing given that the politics represented by the leadership – Harris was a Communist, and two other senior stewards, Bob Ashworth and Bill Mullins, were members of the Militant Tendency (a Trotskyist organisation) - were so divisive in other factories, and that these were well-attended sessions.

Analysing the contributions made by the convenors, the lack of debate becomes understandable. Meetings were short and the issues discussed prosaic. At one typical October 1973 meeting senior stewards expressed concern over the potential effects of external disputes on supplies and detailed a brief stoppage over an 'inefficient tea trolley service'. Finally, the convenor reported on company-wide discussions over the Christmas bonus. Other items like upcoming negotiations over procedures and rate restructuring, might have proved more controversial, but these had already been passed to a “working

---

588 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/1, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 23 May 1972.

589 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 30 May 1974.

party” for consideration.<sup>590</sup> Consequently there was little to provoke dissent and even the two Militant members found themselves discussing the most quotidian issues imaginable on the committee, Ashworth on one occasion raising a mouldy pork pie found in the canteen, and calling on fellow stewards to pass on details of any similar occurrences.<sup>591</sup>

Once again, with a group of assorted “militants” at an early 1970s car factory leading discussions which were wholly unprovocative, the details of shop-floor trade unionism defy stereotypes. Indeed, shop-floor politics at Solihull were restrained even in comparison with other factories led by ostensibly more conservative groups. This behaviour was largely shaped by the ways in which Solihull workers participated in their union. The production workers at Solihull organised according to what they produced, electing a senior steward for each track. When it came to meetings, one of these departmental leaders spoke for each group, reporting back whatever issues their members were dealing with. Thus each part of the factory constituted itself as a discrete area, with workers lined up behind their area stewards, organising on their own terms within their department. Outside production steward meetings they fought out their own departmental problems, bringing only information to factory meetings. This may explain the relative lack of conflict, particularly if leading activists chose to keep overtly “political” matters out of what were often relatively short meetings.<sup>592</sup>

Such dynamics had their advantages. A domestic union organisation with high

---

590 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/2, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 9 October 1973.

591 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 29 July 1975.

592 The start and finishing times intermittently recorded by the minute secretary indicate that regular weekly meetings were supposed to run for approximately 30 minutes only, see: PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/1, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Meeting Minutes, 23 May 1972; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/1, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Meeting Minutes, 20 June 1972; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/2, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Meeting Minutes, 29 November 1973; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/2, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Meeting Minutes, 6 December 1973.

levels of unity and a powerful executive probably made passing policy easier and the strength of the senior stewards may have been a contributing factor to the limited levels of organised opposition to Harris and his allies. However, without contested meetings there was little motivation for stewards to be active both within their section and on the committee, and the Solihull Production Stewards Committee was less exciting than its equivalent at Stoke. With considerable authority in the hands of senior stewards there was also potential for groups to become marginalised. Such a tendency emerged in one very well-attended meeting in May 1974, where disagreements over the annual pay and productivity agreement for once divided the meeting. Stewards from the night shift complained that their allowances were inadequate, whilst others from the P6 (Rover 2000) line demanded to know why their delegate hadn't walked out of negotiations over the issue, as he had been instructed. Their delegate, Ashworth, replied apologetically that, 'the deal could have been negotiated in a better way', then urged the meeting to send the negotiators back for another try. Harris and Mullins announced themselves in favour of the deal, proposing to recommend it to a mass meeting. At this point 18 stewards left in protest, and those remaining passed the convenor's proposal 59 to 43. 'Discussion and disorder' then followed, as the stewards argued over whether the mass meeting would be tomorrow, before Harris put his foot down, stating 'that only one man would decide when the mass meeting would be called, and that was him.'<sup>593</sup>

Despite little indication of prior disagreement, on this occasion substantial numbers of stewards felt the new deal had been negotiated without sufficient consultation. The autocratic tendencies of the convenor could be seen in his reluctance to re-open negotiations over issues of clear concern and in the assertion that he alone was responsible for deciding about the mass meeting. Finally, in the call for Ashworth to account for his role in the agreement, the

---

593 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 30 May 1974.

importance of the track-based constituency system was revealed. For some of the stewards on the P6 “A” shift, the expectation was that Ashworth would directly express their interests, and that it was on this department-based system where their pressure could legitimately be applied. This tendency to compartmentalise the factory can only have further promoted the general trend in shop-floor politics at Solihull to concentrate primarily on the most specific everyday issues, and reflected how social organisation shaped attitudes and behaviours at the factory, particularly in terms of how workers there could be mobilised for strike action.

The following year was transformative for the committee. In January, the TGWU resolved to unify the production workers and the indirects. This fusion brought together 120 production stewards and 100 indirect stewards.<sup>594</sup> The inaugural meeting of the new TGWU SSC reflected many of the existing dynamics within the Solihull shop stewards' movement, and hinted at a number of trends which were about to emerge. The new constitution confirmed the basic social make-up of the organisation, essentially an alliance between different departmental groups, lined up behind area senior stewards. The role of the latter was reaffirmed, with various groups claiming the statutory right to have a senior representative for their area. Old divisions were also reinforced when production stewards were elected for three of the four executive positions.<sup>595</sup> Predictably the result of such dominance by the more numerous production stewards was regular complaints that the plant leadership was insufficiently attentive to the interests of indirects, particularly with regard to demands for unskilled workers to be upgraded to production work.<sup>596</sup> How workers prioritised certain groups and their interests reflected not just straightforward economic

---

594 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 13 January 1975.

595 TGWU SSC, 13 January 1975.

596 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/5, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 6 January, 20 January, 27 January, 7 December 1976.

self-interest, but political dynamics within their organisations.

The 1975 re-organisation further reinforced the authority of senior stewards and contributed to a further decline in the dynamism of the JSSC. This was manifested in dropping attendance levels, which fell from 62 per cent in 1974 to 45 per cent in 1975.<sup>597</sup> Such declining interest indicates both that many stewards increasingly thought their presence unnecessary and that members were far from insistent that they go. In light of complaints about the absence of the senior stewards from both TGWU meetings and “Confed” SSC meetings, it seems apparent that there was increasing disregard for SSCs on the part of the factory leadership.<sup>598</sup> There is also some evidence that Harris' failure to consult with others was drawing the ire even of some of his supporters, who joined other stewards in censuring the senior stewards for conducting negotiations behind closed doors in January 1977.<sup>599</sup>

Despite a lack of interest in the committee, outside meetings TGWU shop stewards continued to engage in regular (mostly sectional) disputes, with 41 mentioned in the minutes for 1975 and 36 for 1976.<sup>600</sup> The biggest collective action in this period was a long-running industrial action on the SD1 (a design sold in various forms; as the Rover 3500, Rover 2300 and Rover Vitesse amongst other things) line in protest at industrial engineering studies being conducted without steward supervision, which lasted from May until October.<sup>601</sup> Disputes like this were managed relatively autonomously through departments

---

597 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/3, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1974; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1975.

598 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/5, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 6 January, 20 January, 27 January, 7 December 1976.

599 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/6, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 2 January 1977.

600 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1975; PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/5, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1976.

601 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/4, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 20 May, 28 October 1975.



and an aloof leadership did not necessarily prevent members from being active on their own account. Yet, however combative some groups could be in sectional disputes, the nature of the factory organisation restricted access to the wider social power of shop-floor trade unionism. In the case of the SD1 stewards, they continued to complain about the lack of support, with money promised for their dispute still to appear a year later, despite time study being potentially an important factory-wide issue. Thus, even when groups delegated stewards to demand support through the SSC for disputes with wide ramifications, such gestures often had little effect.

How far these social practices reflected the attitudes of the Solihull workforce is unclear. The occasions on which the behaviour of the convenors was challenged were relatively rare, and unlike the Stoke stewards there were no occasions on which the stewards documented the leadership getting “turned over” by the membership. Frank Baron, a left-leaning toolmaker who was a steward from 1959, talked of apathy as a contributing factor in shop-floor weakness at Solihull and Harris’ authority may have stemmed from leading a less active workforce, a tendency which possibly had its historical origins in Rover’s more paternalistic management style in the 1950s. If some sections and departments were apathetic, it is also possible that members in more militant departments responded to the nature of the SSC by adhering more closely to their own departmental leadership. The minutes for 1977 show evidence of such forcefulness, with workers in the more militant SD1 department pushing for industrial action over shift patterns and being told to contact their area senior steward.<sup>602</sup>

As is central to this thesis, the form and social practices of shop-floor trade unionism at Solihull shaped the workforces’ reactions to developments both

---

602 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/6, Rover Solihull TGWU Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 22 March 1977.

inside and outside the factory. Whatever the economic and political context, reactions to it were always complicated, and the ways in which workers organised moulded discussions and structured collective action. Like the stewards at Stoke, the leadership at Solihull attempted to reshape their shop floor organisation to deal with the new social and political context of the 1970s, investing more authority in their departmental convenors and SSCs. As the convenors became more dominant, they gained a degree of authority and unity, but as marginal groups became more frustrated at their inability to affect policy attendance dropped, hampering the capacity of the stewards to mobilise the wider workforce. In each case, attempts to resolve the conundrums produced by moving from sectional to factory organising - of authority and democracy, autonomy and leadership - produced different results, which enabled distinct modes of participation amongst the workforce and consequently different configurations of power.

### *Longbridge - presidential shop politics*

Longbridge started life as the main assembly plant for Austin in 1906, before a merger with Morris in 1952 formed BMC. There followed a series of BMC takeovers of smaller companies in the 1960s, before the formation of British Leyland in 1968. Longbridge was the largest plant within the new company, employing around 19,000 manual workers and engaging in multiple parts of the manufacturing process, including machine tools, components, engines and bodies, as well as final assembly.<sup>603</sup> The primary function of these employees was the mass production of Austin-Morris branded motor cars, which meant, for much of this period, production of the iconic Mini. Longbridge had proven difficult to organise but by the mid-1960s was the most strike-prone plant in BL.

---

<sup>603</sup> RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/64, Convenor's Report to the Austin Longbridge JSSC Annual General Meeting, 1 January 1968.

According to government statistics, in 18 months between 1965 and 1966, strikes there accounted for 357,769 lost days, the equivalent of 14 days per worker and three times as many as the Triumph factory at Canley, the next placed car factory.<sup>604</sup> The Engineering Employers Federation's records confirm that such strike proneness continued, noting that Longbridge had 475 strikes between 1968 and 1970, again more than any other affiliated car factory.<sup>605</sup> Most of these strikes were the kind of small, short affair that the Donovan Commission saw as characteristic of the motor industry, with an average of 261 workers participating and 82 per cent lasting less than a day.<sup>606</sup>

In contrast to Stoke and Solihull, shop-floor politics at Longbridge seem to have been relatively stable between 1965 and 1975, with its principal institutions and leading figures established over the course of the previous two decades. Authority over the factory's many departments resided in its JSSC, which brought together all its representatives. Virtually no other factory of Longbridge's size was able to sustain one committee, and even much smaller sites like Solihull and Halewood usually split into separate organisations with their own convenors. Longbridge's success in doing so undoubtedly owed a great deal to its authoritative works committee.

After the Longbridge union movement was re-founded in the 1950s, the seven-person works committee was selected each year by a ballot of stewards, with the most favoured candidate becoming head of the committee. Etheridge retained this position throughout the period with varying degrees of support, receiving 143 votes in 1965, four more than second-placed Derek Robinson. The other winners were from a variety of unions, third-placed Alf Allen was a member of the TGWU; fourth place Stan Colliss in the NUVB, with the Birmingham and Midland Sheet Metal Workers also involved. The committee

---

604 Schedules of Stoppages, January 1965 - July 1966.

605 R.A. Hart, UK Engineering Strikes, 1920-70.

606 R.A. Hart, UK Engineering Strikes, 1920-70.

included one change from the previous year, Dredge replacing Penrise for the electricians.<sup>607</sup> Although there were usually sufficient candidates for a competitive election, the senior stewards from the three largest unions always prevailed, allowing considerable continuity in terms of personnel, with the committee for 1971 featuring five of the 1965 officers.<sup>608</sup>

The works committee had long been a source of central authority for stewards and members, and its workings don't seem to have been substantially affected by any new generation of activists, despite the emergence of an IS factory branch there.<sup>609</sup> Consequently, it was able to adapt relatively easily to the new world of productivity bargaining, in addition to continuing to act as mediator between management and sections (the source of 59 per cent of all discussion at works committee meetings in the early 1970s).<sup>610</sup> Many of these eventually involved senior stewards in the role discussed above; listening to complaints from stewards, then recommending a return to work while they put their argument to management. Derek Robinson was involved in such a case in 1973 (one year prior to his becoming convenor), recommending to a group of setters complaining about unpaid training in the auto shop that they 'resume normal working, ask for an immediate meeting in procedure to discuss and establish the method and payment for training'. The setters refused the offer but agreed to report back to their section.<sup>611</sup>

Similarly, when it came to mass disputes, Longbridge adapted social practices from the previous period, eschewing mass meetings in favour of sectional decision making. Whilst in most factories general policies were decided

---

607 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/11, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 6 January 1964; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/1/11, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, January 1965.

608 Longbridge JSSC, May 1965; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/143, Austin Longbridge JSSC Annual General Meeting Agenda, January 1971.

609 Henderson, p. 76.

610 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/143-191, Agendas and Papers of Austin Longbridge JSSC and Works Committee, 1971-73.

611 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/78, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 12 November 1973.



decisions at both shop and factory level. On one occasion, in 1972, to decide whether to accept formal agreement on MDW votes were taken by 10036 workers in 21 different departments, of which only five produced unanimous results, with most having lengthy debates (2.5 hours was the average) and generating competitive votes before accepting the works committee's recommendation.<sup>613</sup>

The social practices that predominated at Longbridge in the 1960s were evidently sufficiently durable that no transformation such as occurred at Stoke and Solihull was required when new industrial relations policies were established in the 1970s. However, as with the new organisational forms at those factories, continuity posed its own problems in terms of reconciling authority, autonomy and democracy in sectional and factory decision-making. Longbridge continued to generate few major disputes and in general remained conservative over major policy issues, as illustrated by the reluctant attitude shown by their representatives towards committing to sustained mass action on the BL combine committee.<sup>614</sup> Yet the organisation of over 700 stewards and 19,000 workers that Etheridge presided over was quite capable of generating 110 disputes between November 1971 and February 1972. Very few of these strikes were factory-wide affairs - just 4 involved more than 500 workers - with the vast majority initiated at shop, section or departmental level.<sup>615</sup>

Managing so many disputes presented considerable difficulties. As procedure agreements became more formal, the mediatory role adopted by Etheridge required ever more authority, especially as the financial position of the company became more precarious and anxiety about lay-offs more intense. This

---

613 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/173, Agendas and Papers for Longbridge Joint Shop Stewards and Works Committee Meeting, November 1973.

614 BLTUC, MSS.228/2, BMC JSSC Meeting Minutes, 6 November 1968.

615 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/165, Agendas and Papers of Austin Longbridge JSSC and Works Committee, March 1972.

tendency was strengthened by the fact that Etheridge, like many Communists, was a staunch “constitutionalist”, aiming wherever possible to conduct disputes within company procedure and with official approval.<sup>616</sup> Consequently, virtually every strike mentioned in Etheridge's notes during 1972 and 1973 resulted in a recommendation to return to work. This aspect of shop-floor trade unionism, where convenors acted as low-paid personnel managers has been acknowledged as a general feature of the steward system.<sup>617</sup>

However, it was during this period at Longbridge that it became most developed. According to John Bliss, a left-leaning worker in the Cofton Hackett works, this meant that despite his later “red” reputation,<sup>618</sup> Etheridge's successor, Derek Robinson, stopped more strikes than he started: 'until his dismissal [for union activities in 1979], Derek Robinson was hauled out of bed on numerous occasions by the company, “Can you go back Derek, the men are preparing to walk out. Can you go back, and try and prevent it”. And Derek Robinson used to get out of his bed at 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning, go into that factory and reach agreement with the men.'<sup>619</sup> Such trends were further exaggerated by the advent of “Worker Participation”, introduced by British Leyland in 1975 in order to involve union members in improving the company's efficiency.

Whilst workers generally seem to have accepted some elements of the “personnel management” aspect of the convenors' role, strike interventions could potentially reduce the degree of departmental autonomy which was the

---

616 McIlroy, ‘Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics’, p. 219.

617 Tolliday and Zeitlin, ‘Shop-Floor Bargaining’, p. 106.

618 Derek “Red Robbo” Robinson remains, other than Arthur Scargill and Jack Jones, the most recognisable figure from this period's labour militancy. Although his name is now synonymous with the industrial unrest of the 1970s, prior to his dismissal Robinson was widely seen, even by many in BL management, as a conciliatory figure. See: Willman and Winch, *Innovation and Management Control*, p. 83; Claydon, ‘Tales of Disorder’, p. 32; Henderson, *Life on the Track*, pp. 80-81.

619 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/12, John Bliss Interview, 30 October 1982.

lifeblood of sectional bargaining, whilst a perceived closeness to management could bring “sell out” accusations from more militant activists.<sup>620</sup> Occasionally this was reflected in “unofficial unofficial”<sup>621</sup> wildcat strikes in defiance of the factory leadership, but more concretely, where critics were prevented from affecting factory policy groups sometimes formed their own lower-level organisations in different departments and buildings. A number of these bodies emerged between 1968 and 1974, with the papers of Etheridge and the JSSC listing interactions with separate committees for the North and East works, as well as specific groups like the dayworkers.<sup>622</sup> Amongst these groups, the East Works JSSC was the most authoritative and most challenging to the works committee, explaining in a letter shortly after its foundation that it could no longer tolerate delays in obtaining redress for their grievances, adding that they ‘appreciated the ever increasing amount of work being placed of the works committee’ and had therefore resolved to found a new sub-committee in order to help.<sup>623</sup> Chaired by a very active steward named Les Hughes, the East Works JSSC sent regular resolutions outlining their various complaints to and about the works committee, in addition to involving themselves in frequent disputes.

Enabled by their already authoritative works committee, the senior stewards at Longbridge had attempted to solve the problems of 1970s factory politics through relatively minor adjustments to existing social practices and organisations. Over time they found that existing levels of sectional autonomy were endangering the earnings of the wider workforce and potentially the future

---

620 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/158, Austin Longbridge International Socialists East Works Bulletin, November 1971.

621 An “unofficial unofficial” strike refers to a strike that lacks approval not just from the official trade union leadership, but also from factory leaders.

622 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/176, Letter, W. Suett Chair of North Works JSSC to Works Committee, 6 December 1971; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/193, Letter, North Works Direct Workers Committee to Works Committee, 16 June 1973.

623 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/121, Letter, East Works Joint Shop Stewards to Works Committee, November 1969.



of the factory. As a result, the leading stewards attempted to exercise more authority over the workforce, hoping to improve discipline and unity. Curtailing sectional strikes had the side effect of drawing leading stewards closer to management, whilst encouraging centrifugal forces which pushed groups of activists to seek more autonomy. As at Stoke and Solihull, the choices of workers at Longbridge saw their organisations take a different path, with corresponding effects on how they were able to exercise agency within the workplace.

### *Cowley Assembly - the problems of militant leadership*

Cowley was established as the main assembly factory for Morris Motors in the 1920s. After the 1952 merger with Austin, Morris Motors formed an integral part of the largest car company in the country, involved in the mass production of affordable cars like the Marina, the Mini and the Maxi. The assembly plant employed around 8000 people, depending on programme<sup>624</sup>, and despite its relatively late unionisation, by the late 1960s was the site of considerable conflict, producing more strikes (386) between 1968 and 1970 than any other factory of equivalent size.<sup>625</sup> One obvious explanation for this strike proneness was the emergence of a militant leadership group. In 1959 the TGWU convenorship passed to Bob Fryer, a more left-wing figure than his predecessor Frank Horsman.<sup>626</sup> He gathered around him a group of younger stewards, mostly semi-skilled workers, who became increasingly politicised over the course of the 1960s, some joining the Trotskyist Socialist Labour League in 1966.<sup>627</sup>

---

624 Peter Seglow and Patricia Wallace, *Trade Unions and Change in the British Car Industry* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1984), pp. 40–44.

625 R.A. Hart, *UK Engineering Strikes, 1920-70*.

626 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 7.

627 Thornett, *From Militancy to Marxism*, p. 81.

How far the factory's strike record reflected their political views is debatable. The League had around 40 members at its peak,<sup>628</sup> and Cowley Assembly's 386 disputes were spread across 32 different categories of worker and were generally small, with just 19 of them featuring more than 200 workers.<sup>629</sup> Given the experience of convenors elsewhere, it is unlikely that the factory leadership had the reach to be behind the majority of these strikes. Generally, workshop-based strikes depended on a substantial degree of voluntarism and solidarity amongst a small workgroup and were difficult to encourage from outside the section concerned.

Certainly, the records of Cowley's JSSC provide little evidence of that body promoting disputes. During the late 1960s, the committee met on a quarterly basis, holding elections for officers every January.<sup>630</sup> Attendances were erratic, from barely quorate lows, to a high of 150, but failing to ever attract a majority of the 600 stewards in the factory.<sup>631</sup> In any case, quarterly statutory meetings were a poor way of dealing with everyday events, a fact reflected in the content of meetings. At the 22 April 1968 meeting, 39 stewards gathered to discuss their attitudes to pay restraint, the industrial relations department, the new BMC Combine Committee, the engineering industry pay claim, fund-raising for the JSSC and delegates for the company's fact-finding trip to New Zealand.<sup>632</sup> During the meeting two SLL members, John Power and Alan Thornett, passed one militant resolution, calling for a nationwide strike over an engineering wage claim, and pressure on trade union MPs to end wage restraint and force the government to resign.<sup>633</sup> Despite the militant words, no action was involved and no sectional dispute was even mentioned, let alone promoted, even though the

---

628 McIlroy, 'Always Outnumbered', p. 266.

629 R.A. Hart, *UK Engineering Strikes, 1920-70*.

630 BMC JSSC Constitution, Undated.

631 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1968-71.

632 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly Meeting Minutes, 22 April 1968.

633 Cowley JSSC, 22 April 1968.

Engineering Employers Federation recorded 8 strikes that month.<sup>634</sup> The next meeting, in September, was similar, the stewards mainly discussing factory level or external business, with the exception of one dispute in the paint and body Shops which touched on wider principles, relating to the transfer of work away from the factory. Even then the resolution to 'give 100 per cent support to the stewards and members in GK Paint and F Block Body' made no offer of material assistance and in any case was supported by more conservative stewards.<sup>635</sup>

In March 1969, perhaps reflecting its limited capacity to influence events in the factory, the JSSC was again re-founded, with new standing orders establishing tighter rules on conduct, and speakers asked to stand, address the chair as Mr. Chairman and refrain from interrupting or swearing.<sup>636</sup> These changes may have been the result of the committee's first real disagreement. A bumper attendance on 3 March saw 150 stewards discuss the qualification rules for seniority – vital in the event of redundancy or transfer – with the chair forced to curtail a number of speakers.<sup>637</sup> Such vibrant discussion was rare and in September 1969, Les Gurl once again had to remind non-attending stewards of 'their responsibility to their members. You cannot possibly perform your function as a Shop Steward if you are not prepared to attend these meetings... Do not let your members down; do the job that you were elected for.'<sup>638</sup>

That low attendances necessarily suited the SLL-aligned minority should not be assumed. As already noted, at Solihull and Longbridge less active JSSCs helped industrially moderate convenors, whilst the more active the committee

---

634 R.A. Hart, UK Engineering Strikes, 1920-70.

635 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Meeting Minutes, 23 September 1968.

636 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Sub-Committee Meeting Minutes, 10 March 1969.

637 BMC JSSC Constitution, Undated.

638 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Meeting Agenda, 17 November 1969.

became at Stoke, the more successful the militant stewards grew. Cowley's JSSC minutes certainly don't indicate that militant policies were more likely to pass when attendances were low. In the December 1968 and January 1969 meetings, radical resolutions - calling for a 36-hour week and opposition to *In Place of Strife* – were passed in front of comparatively large (a third above average) crowds, whilst at a meeting half the size in 1970 Thornett's call for a blacking campaign in support of the Pilkington glass workers' strike was defeated by 11 votes to 20.<sup>639</sup> The most likely explanation for such trends is that like political minorities elsewhere, the militants at Cowley were not a radically separate caste of outside agitators, as is so often implied in the various dismissals of their influence (discussed in Chapter One), but were themselves (like the IS supporting dockworkers studied by Celia Hughes<sup>640</sup>) “ordinary workers” and formed part a larger group of variably committed stewards and members with personal orientations toward particular types of policies. Sometimes, heightened interest implied a strength of feeling that aided militants; on other occasions it reflected strong opposition to a proposed action. Thus the fortunes of “politicised militants”,<sup>641</sup> like those of their moderate counterparts, were linked in complex ways to the attitudes of their co-workers.

The “militants” were certainly as keen as anybody to attract more people into union activity. The first edition of *Branch News*, the factory bulletin jointly edited by SLL member Alan Thornett and branch chair Tony Bradley, was explicit in outlining its hope that it would stimulate interest: 'we are a living organism of

---

639 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, Morris Cowley Assembly JSSC Meeting Agenda, 2 December 1968, 17 February 1969, 24 August 1970.

640 Celia Hughes, 'Young Socialist Men in 1960s Britain : Subjectivity and Sociability', *History Workshop Journal*, 73 (2012), 170–92 (pp. 172–178). Although some believed at the time that Trotskyist groups deliberately sent their student militants to work at large factories, only the relatively small International Marxist Group seems to have practised this, see: McIlroy, 'Always outnumbered', p. 263.

641 “Politicised militants” is used here as a necessarily clumsy short-hand for those workers who consciously identified themselves with particular political tendencies or parties. In reality, such distinctions are difficult to draw both because of the multitude of grey areas in terms of what constitutes “identification with a political party” and also because consciously “anti-political” activists were, in their own way, also “politicised” in their opposition to politics.

which you [the members] are all a vital part, and only with membership participation can we survive'.<sup>642</sup> The central focus of efforts to improve factory organisation was branch meeting attendance, which rose considerably from 1972 onwards.<sup>643</sup> With fortnightly meetings and branch officers active in producing and distributing a monthly journal, the branch was able to contribute more effectively to factory life, which may explain increasing levels of mass action in this period, with Cowley assembly lines beginning to generate more major strikes. Although attendances remained comparatively modest, 79 per cent of attendees were stewards, meaning that most of those present would report back to their section, amplifying the impact of meetings.<sup>644</sup> The January 1973 meeting was able to hear the opinions of some 70 stewards and a handful of members on a range of issues from the Service factory's fight for a pay rise, through the impact of wage restraint on the sewing machinists, to the paint sprayers' claim for more relief time and the need for a new branch banner, even finding time to unanimously condemn the bombing of Vietnam.<sup>645</sup> With the exception of US imperialism, the issues were similar in range to those discussed by the Stoke JSSC, suggesting that both meetings served a similar purpose.

If 5/55 Branch resembled the Stoke JSSC in some regard, it was also distinctive in ways that predicted later problems for militants. One feature was the tendency of activists to pass resolutions of questionable relevance to many members. Aside from the aforementioned opposition to the bombing of Vietnam, motions were also passed supporting Spanish trade unionists, objecting to the TUC visit to South Africa, support for the Worker Revolutionary

---

642 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Tony Bradley and Alan Thornett, 'Editorial', *Branch News*, September 1969, p. 1 (p. 1).

643 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/5, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 1972; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 1973; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/7, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 1974.

644 ATC, MSS.391/3/34, TGWU Branch 5/55 Attendance Register, 8 January to 15 October 1973.

645 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 8 January 1973.

Party's [WRP<sup>646</sup>] industrial front group the All Trade Union Alliance, as well as a simultaneous condemnation of Allende's Popular Frontism and the Pinochet coup d'etat in Chile.<sup>647</sup> Such resolutions, whilst never committing substantial money or resources, no doubt irritated those stewards whose definition of trade unionism was narrower, and who may have felt their time was being wasted on “political” issues they could not affect.

More problems were sometimes generated indirectly through the branch's domestic policies. Instances in which 5/55 Branch squashed a strike are virtually non-existent in branch minutes and virtually all references to disputes within the factory recount offers of support.<sup>648</sup> In contrast with the organisation at the Cowley body plant, where all sectional disputes were first submitted for approval to the JSSC,<sup>649</sup> 5/55 also advocated several general policies which were liable to cause ongoing disputes and offered in effect *carte blanche* to workgroups to engage in conflict whenever they felt need. This included a policy against “job measurement”, which in March 1973, saw stewards note with approval a strike where operators stopped work to prevent their jobs being timed by industrial engineers.<sup>650</sup> In a factory with hundreds of strikes a year such attitudes were a recipe for division. Whilst small disputes may not have cost participants much, when added to occasional one-day “political” strikes, regular small-scale “downers”<sup>651</sup> could irritate more conflict-averse members. The most dramatic manifestation of this tendency came in August 1972, when the BL Combine Committee agreed to hold a one-day nationwide strike in support of a factory occupation at Thornycroft transmissions plant. Fryer and

---

646 In 1973, the SLL changed its name to the Workers Revolutionary Party.

647 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/5, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 10 October 1972; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 17 September 1973; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 2 April 1973; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 19 March 1973.

648 5/55 Branch Minutes, 1973.

649 Buckle, p. 21.

650 5/55 Branch, 19 March 1973.

651 A brief and spontaneous stoppage.

the AEU convenor Doug Hobbs put the case for the strike to a day shift mass meeting, winning a close vote in favour of the action. Many night shift workers, invited to the day shift meeting but not permitted a vote of their own, objected to the stoppage and reacted by taking out their frustrations in a small riot, doing such damage that eventually management pleaded with the senior stewards to address the workers and calm them down.<sup>652</sup>

The attitudes and behaviours of the leading stewards at Cowley inevitably also caused friction between them and more moderate trade union officials, the minutes for 1973 documenting serious arguments with district organiser Bill Thompson and local official Dave Buckle.<sup>653</sup> Following complaints from Reg Parsons (a former SLL member turned moderate) that senior stewards were not using their positions 'to encourage workpeople to work and use procedure', TGWU officials finally decided to split the 5/55 branch.<sup>654</sup> In 1974, the new branch was then ordered to elect its convenors by secret ballot of the membership, with Parsons winning 1,881 votes in the resulting election, ahead of Fryer's 824 and Thornett's 407.<sup>655</sup>

I will discuss the precise meaning of Parsons' victory in greater detail in Chapter Five. However, it is worth examining here the organisational ramifications of his defeating two advocates of less restrained militancy. The purpose of BL introducing MDW in 1971 had been to exchange a flat day rate for "scientific management" and continuous production, with wage rises exchanged for rising productivity. Resistance to the scheme had led management to concede "mutuality" or negotiation over work standards.<sup>656</sup> This

---

652 Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 61–64.

653 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/6, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 15 October 1973.

654 ATC, MSS.393/3/33, Letter, Reg Parsons to Brian Mathers, TGWU Region 5 Secretary, 30/1/1973.

655 Raymond Perman, 'Workers at Cowley Reject Trotskyist Mr Thornett', *The Times*, 6 June 1974, p. 5.

656 Stephen Johns and Alan Thornett, *Victimization at Cowley*. (London, 1974), pp. 56–57.

gave workers some control over line speed, but only provided they were prepared to engage in constant conflict to maintain the status quo. The convenor election took place in April 1974, just as Thornett was being demonised in the press for causing another strike to defend mutuality. Following the dispute, management decided to withdraw his Deputy Convenor credentials, citing a long list of unauthorised meetings and activities, as well as articles in *Branch News* encouraging strikes. The transport department struck in his defence, disrupting supplies from the body plant and rapidly closing the factory, leading to further press attacks on Thornett.<sup>657</sup> Piled on top of the very real problems of sustained militancy, the crisis of 1974 evidently convinced large numbers of Cowley workers that they were better off with more co-operative leaders.

The problem Parsons now faced was the mirror image of that which the old leadership had confronted. In a factory where conflict was endemic and sectional, Parsons had to find a way to reduce the number of strikes, helping the company to raise productivity and suppress pay, without alienating groups of workers. This was a battle Parsons eventually lost, with the left winning back the convenorship in 1977. The swinging pendulum between Parsons and Fryer perfectly illustrated the essential contradiction of shop-floor trade unionism, that consistent militancy could be draining and divisive, whilst co-operation meant constant, demoralising, concessions. Cowley activists on both sides found themselves trying to strike an awkward balance between militancy and moderation, activism and apathy. Whilst the Longbridge stewards tried to resolve such issues by combining substantial sectional autonomy with mediation from above, and those at Halewood attempted to focus collective impulses on mass action, Cowley militants had simultaneously given free rein to sectional militancy, whilst also trying to build mass action. Having succeeded in

---

<sup>657</sup> Colin Pratt, 'Wives Strike Back', *Daily Express*, 23 April 1974, p. 1; Margaret Hall, 'Revolt of the Fed-Up Wives', *Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1974.



doing both they seem to have induced a battle weariness which over the longer term undermined their authority.

## **The problems and opportunities of factory trade unionism**

Factories in different firms and locations confronted similar problems and developments in the period of productivity bargaining. After the spread of a sectional system of shop-floor bargaining during the 1950s and 1960s, the defining features of which had been shop democracy, sectional autonomy and weak factory-level organisation, from 1968 onwards the situation changed as employers and governments launched projects aimed at reducing the social power of workgroups and stewards. Leaders and activists now struggled with the process of creating unified organisations capable of delivering cohesive policies for problems now posed at factory, company or state levels, particularly in light of new formal agreements over pay, productivity and mutuality. Simultaneously they found themselves trying to mitigate the potentially negative effects of old-style sectional militancy, without endangering the autonomy that had been the lifeblood of trade unionism for the past decade and which was now vital for the defence of new rights conceded in comprehensive bargaining.

Generally car workers responded by strengthening central factory organisations, becoming more activist, and engaging in more mass action. At several factories, these new tendencies emerged alongside groups of younger (sometimes politically radical) activists, who both fed on and influenced these events, perhaps reflecting a wider phenomenon repeated in other industries.<sup>658</sup> There was also a discernible rise in major strikes and other types of mass industrial and political action. However, reflecting the differing orientations and historical experiences of participants, these responses were uneven and varied

---

<sup>658</sup> Todd, *The People*, pp. 275–285.

considerably in terms of content. At Halewood, stewards in the assembly plant invested more authority in their stewards and tried to use their union branch to elicit more support from official unions. Within the factory they made increasing use of mass meetings and agitational propaganda to secure support for mass action. Alongside this new militancy came new discipline, as the Halewood assembly plant JSSC looked to restrict sectional militancy that leaders considered “daft”, a tendency that grew in the 1970s into a thoroughgoing conservatism.

At Stoke, workers faced with similar dilemmas behaved differently. Initially disorientated, as the full effects of management reforms became apparent a new generation of activists came forward, either pushed by their members or through personal conviction. The previously rather moribund JSSC became an increasingly politicised body, with more mass meetings, more debate and more instructions to stewards. In contrast to Halewood, where factory leaders provided much of the impetus for JSSC activities, Stoke's shop-floor organisation was more of a parliamentary system, where workers sent their stewards as delegates to democratically fight their corner on the joint shop stewards' committee, a practice which sometimes generated considerable disunity. Later, like their counterparts on Merseyside they became more bureaucratic in their suppression of dissent.

Factories like Solihull found other ways of resolving the conundrum of comprehensive bargaining. Whereas Halewood acted in a democratic centralist manner, using stewards to promote policy, and Stoke organised itself in a parliamentary way with stewards representing their particular shops, Solihull departmentalised its activism, splitting the workforce into large groups defined by product, and creating several powerful full-time area convenors. This produced a vibrant sectional activism but left the factory convenor as a dominant and fairly conservative brake on broader action. With departmental

committees, strong convenors and a prosaic stewards' committee, Solihull faced the dangers of top-down trade unionism and dropping levels of participation.

Whilst these organisations underwent substantial change during this period, Longbridge maintained a degree of continuity. Having entered the late 1960s with an authoritative works committee already in place, the need to produce a body capable of generating coherent factory policy was less urgent, so Longbridge activists merely adjusted the existing balance between sectional liberty and central dispute management to give slightly more weight to the latter, attempting to reconcile autonomy and leadership, militancy and moderation, democracy and authority. The result was a system that perpetuated slightly more liberty at sectional level than elsewhere but that was less dynamic in its external politics. Relying on sectional groups to defend established rights, Longbridge struggled to produce a strong factory-wide union consciousness, whilst in their attempts to restrain sectional militancy, its leaders became increasingly incorporated into the aims of the company.

Morris Cowley Assembly, emblematic of labour militancy in this period, combined many of these tendencies but with several crucial differences. Like Stoke, Morris had produced a new generation of highly politicised activists (who actually took control of senior positions in the factory union organisation) and like Halewood they attempted to use the JSSC and the branch to promote their ideas and policies amongst the workforce and the wider union. Like Longbridge they also continued to indulge the sectional autonomy of their members long after the heyday of sectional bargaining had passed. However unlike any of those organisations, the Morris JSSC imposed no restrictions on the exercise of either factory or sectional social power, encouraging the fullest possible exercise of both. The results were an unsolvable contradiction, where constant activity was draining and expensive, but inaction brought allowed conditions to

deteriorate.

In every case, workers employed different social practices to solve broadly the same conundrum – how to exercise social power effectively at a factory or company level whilst preserving the democratic rights of individual workers. All these formulations both enabled and constrained behaviours, encouraging mass strikes led by JSSCs, works committees or unions, encouraging sectional action to different degrees. Some of the tendencies had the effect of democratising factory policies. The range of issues which car workers could affect increased in line with their striking power, as sustained mass strikes and factory occupations became a more realistic option. On the issue of redundancy, for instance, both governments and employers seem to have become very wary of mass redundancies and factory closures during this period, with the former offering bailouts to keep factories open and the latter becoming more generous with severance pay. BL's evidently reluctant concession of mutuality in its MDW agreements was testament to their fear of mass action in resistance to the policy. As factories like Solihull, Cowley, Halewood and Stoke began to generate more mass meetings, workers could also have a direct say on whether particular factory policies were acceptable or not, even if they were limited to accepting or declining an agreement which had been negotiated without them.

On the other hand, with negotiations now in the hands of central factory organisations, it became more difficult for individuals to shape the form of agreements or responses to management offers in the same way as under sectionalism. They now came to rely more heavily on steward delegation as an indirect means of influencing policy, something that seems to have been a very clumsy tool. Since steward work involved contributing considerable time for little recompense and was considered an undesirable position by many workers, elections were rarely competitive (a survey in 1973 estimated that only 7 per

cent in all industries won their position by defeating an incumbent<sup>659</sup>) with incumbents only generally ousted when they had significantly lost the trust of their membership. In any case, the ability to elect one steward amongst several hundred to represent your section was no real substitute for the system of small-group assemblies which had developed earlier and in factory negotiations workers were effectively denied the right to develop consensus through group discussion and small-scale direct democracy. The Longbridge system of totalling up shop votes was in part an attempt to restore some of the benefits of decentralisation.

## Conclusion

At each of the factories I have looked at, the development of organisations, social practices and cultural norms after 1968 was shaped, not just economic conditions or their industrial relations policies, but by their particular histories and their changing cast of participants. At Solihull, as the company hired semi-skilled workers in its shift towards mass production on the car side, new generations of activists joined with previously more marginalised leftists to bring more order to steward organisation and factory policy making. At Cowley, the company's hostility to trade unionism in the 1950s evidently contributed to the emergence of a layer of leadership which encouraged militancy of all types, whilst the authoritative Longbridge works committee maintained its long-standing role into the 1970s. These organisations all encouraged peculiar types of activism. Solihull tended to departmentalise its bargaining and produced relatively few factory strikes, whilst Halewood JSSC's dynamic activism within the wider union enabled it to lead several huge nationwide strikes. Cowley workers were allowed to pursue sectional grievances, but had little capacity to

---

659 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 128.

prevent disputes in other departments from laying them off.

Just as in the earlier period discussed in this chapter, these disparate forms of organisation and social practices served different purposes and enabled different democratic interventions, making a substantial contribution to the behaviours for which the motor industry became so notorious. In the earlier period sectional decentralisation was perpetuated because of its usefulness in allowing widespread democratic control over both unions and conditions. Consequently it generated frequent small-scale disruptions which prevented employers from better exploiting their workforce. In the latter period, workers adapted their organisations to respond to an “employers offensive”, in order to sustain their influence, something that was achieved with mixed success. In each case, social practices were changed – as they had done in the 1950s - through the agency of the workers themselves, a transformation that substantially affected the operation of domination at work (but rarely outside work). The forms of social organisation adopted enabled each group to draw on a particular configuration of collective power, allowing both groups and individuals to intervene in workplace life in certain ways, whilst constraining other activities in an attempt to regulate what sociologist Tony Lane called the 'free market' of sectional bargaining.<sup>660</sup>

In disaggregating the different component parts of trade unionism during this period and studying shop-floor activism in more detail, in this chapter I have been able to uncover how the forms of social relationships these workers developed determined the state of their individual and collective agency within the particular economic and political context in which they operated. It was through these organisations that responses to broader changes were mediated and articulated, and they partially set the parameters for collective decision-making and collective action, as well as workers' social power. The ways in

---

660 Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, p. 204.

which the exercise of the latter shaped the experiences, attitudes, values and rationalities of workers will be explored in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Militancy, attitudes, values and rationalities**

In 1968, Birmingham-born Colin Fitzer went to work for Rover in Solihull. Previously Fitzer had worked for a small firm making cabinets, where he was dismissed after arguing with the owner over a wage deduction for absenteeism. In contrast to his previous employment, at Solihull he found a closed shop, steward representation and well-attended workgroup meetings. Fitzer, then a member of the Labour Party, later went on to become more involved in factory politics, particularly in the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act in the early 1970s,<sup>661</sup> and his experiences reflect a number of developments in car factory life in this period. Moving from a small firm with a weak union, at Rover he involved himself in the kind of workplace social organisation that by 1968 had become the norm: the small-group workshop democracy and decentralised shop-floor bargaining described in Chapter Four. Subsequently, as British trade unionism entered a period of intensified labour militancy,<sup>662</sup> Fitzer's inclination towards activism expressed itself more openly as he became a steward and a campaigner against the Conservative government.

Fitzer's personal story exemplifies the broader themes that will be dealt with in this chapter. Throughout this thesis I have argued that to understand better the nature of post-war labour militancy we need to look beyond straightforward economic motivation and explain the nature of workers' agency and thus the context in which attitudes and orientations were formed. Having explored the complexities of "organising", and how the resulting forms of organisation at

---

661 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/32, Colin Fitzer Interview, December 1982.

662 Dave Lyddon, "Glorious Summer", 1972: The High Tide of Rank and File Militancy', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol.2, 1964-79*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 326–52.



factory and sectional levels both enabled and constrained the social power of car workers, this chapter will consider how access to these social practices and the *habitus* they structured affected ideas about work, collective action and the economy. I will continue to argue that much of the existing historiography of this period has neglected the pivotal role of car workers in making and re-making shop-floor culture. In Chapter Three I emphasised the centrality of worker activists in that process. This was followed in Chapter Four by a detailed analysis of the social relations that became dominant in those cultures and the ways in which they enabled and constrained interventions in workplace life. In this chapter I will argue that the moral values and pragmatic reasoning (based on the subject's own calculation of their rational self-interest) produced by these cultures were another crucial element in structuring attitudes and behaviours at work. In analysing those cultures this chapter will look beyond the binary established in much labour history, in which “ordinary” workers are counterpoised with an “extraordinary” fraction of motivated, class-conscious activists. I will outline the ways in which the majority of car workers in this period adopted many ideas about the world of work that were often in themselves “extraordinary” in terms of wider British society and the discourses discussed in Chapter Two, and how the politicisation of activist workers reflected those ideas as much as it did their external political affiliations.

The first two sections of this chapter will look at decentralised bargaining. The previous chapter drew attention to the ways in which sectional democracy enabled workers to exert control over substantial areas of their working lives, but placed limits on interventions in wider issues beyond the boundaries of their own departments. Drawing comparisons between individual responses to sociological surveys, life history interviews and the documents of shop stewards' organisations, I will assert that although most workers generally expressed “conventional” attitudes with regard to industrial issues, within the context of small-group democracy many workers operated according to values

which differed substantially from those employed by policy makers and social commentators. Shaped by the social practices of shop-floor trade unionism, such concepts contributed to the “transgressive” behaviours that came to be defined as the “British disease”.

The penultimate section will consider militant trade unionism's “high tide” between 1970 and 1974, when strike action was most widespread. Discussion will centre on two aspects of workplace culture; firstly, the ways in which the values that developed during the heyday of decentralised bargaining shaped worker responses to the changing industrial relations of the early 1970s. Particular attention will be paid to how ideas of workshop autonomy both helped and hindered worker responses to the new world of “productivity bargaining”. This section will then consider how far the re-making of social practices brought with it shifts in shared values, asking whether the attempts to reinforce central factory organisations discussed in Chapter Four created spaces in which activists could persuade workers to participate in broader and more politicised activism. In the final section, I will focus on the period between 1974 and 1977, drawing out the different perspectives workers developed towards how their social organisations operated.

In both sections, I will argue that the relationship between social practices, shared cultures, worker rationalities and collective action were crucial. Confronted by a context in which much of their activity was understood in terms of pathology, in the mid-sixties, an *ad hoc* direct democracy at workshop level sustained the transgressiveness of the “British disease”, producing and being produced by partially autonomous moral values regarding trade unionism and the economy, and pragmatic reasoning regarding industrial relations. In the early 1970s, values and practices inherited from earlier phases of organisation structured initial reactions to “productivity bargaining” and gradual changes in organisational practices brought in their turn shifts in collective values, reflected

in new attitudes and behaviours.

### **Mainstream values and workgroup autonomy: 1964-68**

Between 1964 and 1968 sectional bargaining was central to the narratives of the press and politicians, also becoming the main focus of the Donovan Report and *In Place of Strife*. Alongside unofficial strikes, this commentary raised concerns around union power, the freedom of individuals under the closed shop, the capacity of British companies to modernise and the continuing tendency toward “wage drift”. Surveys of car workers' opinions in this period indicate a degree of acceptance of these narratives. For instance Vauxhall assemblers interviewed for *The Affluent Worker* displayed attitudes conducive to industrial co-operation, with the overwhelming majority (79 per cent, higher than non-Vauxhall workers interviewed) agreeing that ‘teamwork means success and is to everyone's advantage’.<sup>663</sup> Although Vauxhall's dispute record may indicate they were more co-operatively minded than most, even at more militant Halewood in 1967, ordinary members thought Ford a comparatively “understanding” employer and expressed satisfaction with their pay and conditions. Such responses indicate that most workers adhered, at least in abstract terms, to opinions prevalent in wider society: that industrial success required co-operation and that union power had to be balanced against the greater good.

These ideas coincide with the prevailing view of workers' attitudes during this period as expressed in the historiography, particularly in the privatism thesis discussed in previous chapters.<sup>664</sup> Often drawing on *The Affluent Worker* survey, writers like Brian Harrison have stressed the limited expectations

---

663 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 73.

664 Robert Taylor, ‘The Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes’, pp. 378–379.

workers generally had of their trade unions and the conventionality of their outlooks more generally. Arguing that workers did not see trade unions 'as part of a social movement or as a vehicle of social-class values', Harrison attributes militancy to a 'utilitarian' attempt to maximise income, which had no wider aim for its politically unremarkable participants.<sup>665</sup> As I have noted earlier, this tendency to discern "collective instrumentalism" in worker attitudes, often allied to explorations of "politicised militancy", is strongly echoed by the voluntarist school of labour historians which argues that even the most strike-prone workers held broadly mainstream views.<sup>666</sup>

Although, as I have discussed in previous chapters, the relationship between industrial action and economic motivation was not as straightforward as many historians have claimed, the idea that most strikers saw themselves as "ordinary workers" engaging in nothing more than "reasonable" collective bargaining is not without merit. Similar sentiments were also expressed, even amongst strongly union-inclined workers, in interviews conducted by Paul Worm. Amy Wren, a steward for the inspectors at Rover's Percy Road component plant in the 1960s, saw calculative co-operation at the heart of her trade unionism: 'Rather than come out on strike I'd compromise – as long as they compromised to a good extent to the way I wanted. I knew you couldn't get it all.'<sup>667</sup> Wren, from a union background – her father was a TGWU member, and both her husband and brother were Rover shop stewards – saw co-operation and compromise as vital components of industrial life.

Such views were commonplace in car factories at this time and are repeatedly reflected not only in the Goldthorpe interviews, but in other sociological studies dealing with motor industry workers, including Batstone *et al's Shop Stewards in Action* and in interviews conducted by Worm. Indeed, it is virtually impossible

---

665 Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, p. 210.

666 Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, pp. 80–85; Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 295.

667 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/14, Amy Wren Interview, 2 November 1982.

to find any survey conducted with manual workers in this period – including with supposedly more traditionally class-conscious groups like shipbuilders and dockers<sup>668</sup> – that does not come to a similar conclusion: that even the most strike-prone groups of workers had broadly mainstream ideas about the nature of the society they lived in and the work they did within it. Yet, as I noted in Chapter Two, these same workers repeatedly engaged in collective behaviour that was deemed transgressive by that same society, a dichotomy that demands an explanation.

In part, the answer might be found in the different meanings that workers attached to these ideas. Once we explore the calculative nature of Wren's "co-operation" in more detail, we discover the different uses that abstract ideas could have in practice. For instance, when asked if she regularly took her members out on strike, Wren replied 'oh I threatened to', hinting at how she made use of both her members' solidarity and the wider context of industrial conflict around her.<sup>669</sup> Wren had also participated in factory strikes in the past and was clearly capable of engaging in some of the supposedly problematic behaviours associated with sectional bargaining, even whilst subscribing to broadly mainstream ideas about industrial relations. Within the context of the workplace culture I have explored in previous chapters, the meaning that she and others attributed to compromise and co-operation hints at the complexity the language of "reasonable collective bargaining" could entail. Despite having otherwise "conventional" opinions, within the context of the workplace *habitus*, these concepts were employed in ways that saw workers inadvertently engaging in behaviour regarded as disorderly by outsiders.

Signs of similar ideas to Wren's can also be found in a re-examination of Vauxhall workers' responses to *The Affluent Worker* survey, for instance in the

---

668 Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, pp. 217–218; Stephen Hill, *The Dockers: Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 109–112.

669 Amy Wren Interview, 2 November 1982.

view that their employer could afford to pay them more, and their clear expectations of rising living standards.<sup>670</sup> The workers also agreed that trade union representation was necessary if workers expected to obtain decent pay and working conditions, a view echoed by Wren, who noted that sometimes strikes were necessary 'to let them know that you wasn't just going to let them walk [all] over you'.<sup>671</sup> The development of these attitudes was, as we saw in Chapter Three, a key element in initial union organisation. As shop bargaining became more widespread, workers began to demand steadily increasing wages, often as a response to the successes of others. As living standards rose expectations rose with them, fuelling further demands.

These workers' previous experiences left many with the impression that improvements were a product of collective agitation rather than employers' largesse, and the argument that present conditions and future gains depended on struggle was pervasive in activist discourse. Even moderate workers like Cowley Body Plant steward Dave Buckle noted years later that 'as long as cars were going off the end of the line nobody bothered, nobody took any interest in you. But the moment we stopped work all hell would be let loose'.<sup>672</sup> At Cowley Assembly such assertions were constant, with meetings in 1968 showing the use of such logic before and after disputes, for instance, when the JSSC considered the problem of securing work for paint and body shop workers on BL's new Maxi programme. The stewards present voted unanimously to offer '100 per cent support' to members in their demand for management 'to honour its undertaking to these two departments'.<sup>673</sup> That the stewards felt they had to offer support for 'any action necessary', despite already having been promised

---

670 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 87, 140.

671 Amy Wren Interview, 2 November 1982.

672 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 224–225; Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 73; Passingham and Connor, pp. 1–4.

673 BLTUC, MSS.228/15, (Morris Cowley Assembly) JSSC Meeting Minutes, 23 September 1968.

the work was reflective of the widespread sentiment that management made concessions only in the face of pressure. After disputes this feeling was reinforced by attributing successful outcomes to union action. At meetings of the Cowley Assembly TGWU Branch (5/55) congratulations were regularly offered to groups who had won concessions. In 1968 monthly meetings featured reports on an increase for ambulance drivers in March, on an agreement on waiting time for piece workers and a pay increase for maintenance workers in April, as well as advances for women working in the Service factory and in the canteen.<sup>674</sup>

The rationality displayed in everyday disputes often fed on a wider value system in which the better conditions that workers enjoyed in the 1960s were attributed to the effective trade unionism of the past, a message communicated through collective memories of factory life. Just as dockers and miners told stories of more oppressive eras to emphasise the importance of trade unionism, car workers drew on their own stories of the “bad old days” to stress the importance of participation.<sup>675</sup> Halewood workers repeatedly explained the significance of their trade unionism in terms of previous conditions: ‘I expect everyone has told you how bad it was down here in the beginning have they? It was murder. We had no representation. We were just supposed to do exactly as we were told.’<sup>676</sup> Whenever the stewards felt a dispute potentially endangered their organisation they invoked the spectre of the “ball and chain”, the period in the factory’s history when supervisors exercised unilateral control and the stewards were “chained” to the track.<sup>677</sup>

The readiness to employ such approaches in building support for action is

---

674 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/2, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 11 March, 13 April, 8 July, 12 August, 11 November, 9 December 1968.

675 Henderson, *Life on the Track*, p. 47; Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 193–195; Passingham and Connor, pp. 1–4.

676 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 142.

677 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 244, 309.

indicative of their wide resonance and the way Longbridge workers mobilised arguments about slow progress and unfair treatment implicitly invoked the idea that redress required mobilisation. One group of fibre glass workers wrote to the Works Committee in 1966, arguing that their claim dated back to a promise made some fourteen years previously, a strong justification for their feeling that nothing could be achieved without collective action.<sup>678</sup> Over two decades many at Longbridge and elsewhere had become accustomed to the idea that belligerence was necessary in order to get fair treatment on a wide range of issues. These attitudes towards collective bargaining partially explain rising union density and assertiveness. Historical experiences of success were also important in reinforcing these basic ideas, to the extent that organisations sometimes deliberately reminded their members where wage increases came from.<sup>679</sup> The combination of using these values in an instrumental way in disputes and their active propagation after disputes reinforced the idea that industrial action was an effective way of resolving problems.

### *Autonomy as a value*

Although these historical experiences and widespread attitudes explain the importance of trade unionism to car workers, there was another layer to shop-floor politics in this period. Expectations of increasing affluence, and dependence on collective bargaining were important elements of the “normal trade unionism” that formed part of mainstream public discourse, but they do not entirely explain the readiness of car workers to engage in so-called “problem” behaviours. Yet, as we have seen, the practice which defined British industrial relations in this period was the “transgressive” unofficial strike, a more difficult form of action to justify, and one which even many trade unionists disapproved of.<sup>680</sup>

---

678 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/63, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 16 August 1966.

679 Rootes JSSC, 4 June 1966.

680 One such survey, conducted in the late 1960s, asked trade unionists if they thought



The prevalence of such “lightning strikes” has often been attributed directly to the piecework system.<sup>681</sup> However, wage structures do not wholly explain changes in collective behaviour in this period. For one thing, despite both Vauxhall and Ford adopting flat hourly rates under Measured Day Work [MDW], sectional bargaining also emerged in their factories during the 1960s, with stewards at Halewood, Luton and Dagenham in the 1960s describing many small “downers” very similar to those common under piecework.<sup>682</sup> Indeed, even in 1960s piecework factories many workers were “indirects” – non-pieceworkers – but these groups still engaged in workshop-based bargaining. At Longbridge in 1967, 44 per cent of manual workers fell into this category, and they too had become increasingly involved in sectional activism from the late 1950s, an indication that the phenomenon was not as connected to defending craftworker privileges as has often been imagined.<sup>683</sup> The gradual disappearance of demarcation divisions and the decline in wage differentials from 1967 to 1977 certainly indicates that sectionalism was an ineffective tool for such purposes and largely confirms Cronin's view that labour militancy was mainly about 'levelling up'.<sup>684</sup>

In many cases sectional bargaining appeared even where pay structures discouraged it by concentrating bargaining at national level. The most obvious

---

unofficial strikes should be curbed, 64 per cent agreed that they did, against 28 per cent who disagreed, see: Jay G. Blumler and Alison J. Ewbank, 'Trade Unionists, the Mass Media and Unofficial Strikes', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 8 (1970), 32–54 (p. 44).

681 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 172; Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 142–164.

682 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 83–84, 104, 131–140; Peter Ashcroft, 'More about Vauxhall', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, July 1967, pp. 6–8; Spartacus, 'The Vauxhall Struggle', p. 5; 'Working for Ford - Seen from Vauxhall', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, April 1974, 16 (p. 16); 'I Work at Fords', p. 4; Jeffreys, 'Too Old at 50', p. 22.

683 Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation', p. 186; Zeitlin, 'Workplace Militancy: A Rejoinder', p. 134; Harris, 'Tradition and Transformation', p. 109; Dennie Oude Nijhuis, 'Explaining British Voluntarism', *Labor History*, 52 (2011), 373–98 (pp. 373–389); Robert Taylor, 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes', pp. 380–381.

684 Cronin, *Labour and Society*, pp. 191–193.

reason for this, dismissed in accounts which take the capacity for strike action for granted, is the ease with which solidarity and organisation could be produced at workshop level. The section-by-section advances made in the 1950s gave most activists a sense that a good steward with a committed work-group could make substantial improvements, and by the 1960s sectional strikes had proven effective in terms of raising pay, gaining control over working conditions and in promoting trade unionism. With management often resistant to concessions over what they saw as managerial prerogatives – discipline, work allocation, hiring and firing – and the official procedure sometimes taking up to 12 months to process cases,<sup>685</sup> the sense of control that sectional bargaining offered was crucial and can be seen particularly strongly in the positive attitudes many developed towards piecework.

Brian Bird, who in 1964 became a paint sprayer at Rover's Acocks Green factory in Birmingham, recalled the system fondly, describing the control that workgroups built up: 'we had a very democratic way of working and the piece work system when – we really got a bit of shop floor democracy. We actually run, ourselves, in many cases, our own affairs.'<sup>686</sup> For other, more politicised stewards, these rights were understood as a function of workers' struggle. One leaflet distributed by Longbridge IS declared that 'the strength of the shop steward organisation has grown out of the daily struggle over p.w.p. [piece work prices] and lieu rates'.<sup>687</sup> In part, some of these workers were expressing the idea that piecework was easy to exploit. However, as the leaflet's inclusion of lieu rates implies, sectional bargaining also gave dayworkers a degree of social power. Martin Kavanagh, the TGWU convenor responsible for organising the "indirects" at Solihull, even claimed that declining differentials and better job

---

685 Turner, Clack and Roberts, *Labour Relations*, pp. 253–257; Tolliday, 'Ford and "Fordism"', p. 88.

686 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/3/29, Brian Bird Interview, 1 December 1982.

687 CB, MSS.152/1/5/12, Birmingham International Socialists, "Measured Day Work, What It Is and How to Fight It" (handbill), 1969.

security actually left many of his members better off than their lineworker counterparts in the 1960s.<sup>688</sup>

In light of the difficult process described in Chapters Three and Four, whereby these workgroups built solidarities and a capacity for collective action from the ground up, the determination of some workers to perpetuate them becomes easier to explain. Sectional autonomy, the capacity of workgroups to take their own decisions, was often not just a by-product of piecework but an active preference on the part of many car workers – including daily paid ones - who rejected control by central bodies. Such attitudes are made clear during the many disputes during which workers employed arguments based around their right to decide as a group. One letter sent to the Longbridge Works Committee in September 1967 reflected how decentralised social practices became incorporated into workers' moral values, shaping their sense of what their rights were. Informed by management that they would be receiving a 'fall-back payment' of 6s 6d per hour for the next four weeks, on account of 'abnormal conditions' arising from a "face-lift" (redesign), stewards for the Mini assembly workers issued a joint letter expressing a number of concerns which reflected their strong sense of sectional rights.

*Since an application from us to [works manager] Mr. Galloway for an informal meeting has been unfavourably received, we are compelled to ask that the Works Committee raise this matter on behalf of our members... We would raise, among others, the following points...'Why was there no attempt at prior consultation?... On what grounds are some superintendents claiming ... that there is or has been an agreement made in the factory between management and union officials, that 6/6 per hour be paid for the introduction of new work or where new materials prevents the*

---

688 Martin Kavanagh Interview, 21 February 1982.

*piecework condition from applying?... Is there or has there ever been an agreement – **except an ad hoc agreement some years [ago] on an individual section** [original emphasis] - to this effect?... Why is it that the original statement made to each area at the beginning of this week has been altered, amended or retracted in some areas and not in others?*<sup>689</sup>

The letter objected strongly to management's refusal to speak to stewards regarding the new arrangements. The list of complaints asserted the right to consultation over change, highlighting in particular their objection to the idea that a previous agreement committed them to the changes. The stewards also invoked two important elements of sectional autonomy: the refusal to abide by any agreement not ratified by the workers and a plea for equal treatment between sections. The letter closed as follows:

*Finally we would ask you again to express in the strongest possible terms that we consider declarations of intent of this nature to have an invidious effect on harmony and the spirit of agreements in the factory. Our members instruct us to say that they would never agree to this as a method of Collective Bargaining – nor would they agree in any case to a figure of 6/6 per head for this condition.*<sup>690</sup>

The final paragraph expressed neatly both principal elements of their complaint, firstly, indignation at the violation of their right to proper collective bargaining. Secondly, the instrumentalisation of that outrage behind a straightforward pay issue. Finally, the last sentence notes the origins of the complaint in a section meeting, where the members “instructed” the stewards to raise their concerns.

---

689 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Letter, ADO15 Production Stewards to Dick Etheridge, 14 September 1967.

690 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Letter, ADO15 Production Stewards to Dick Etheridge, 14 September 1967.

Each element of the dispute – the right to be consulted over change, autonomy from the wider union, democratic mandates, fairness between sections – reflected different elements of the moral value system that lay behind Britain's strike pattern. Mandates were particularly crucial. Stewards arguing with Longbridge management in 1965 frequently made reference to what their members had told them to argue for and what they might be persuaded to accept. In the final week of January, Etheridge met with several sections, trackworkers, sewing machinists, paint sprayers and component machinists, all of whom came with demands agreed in advance and brought only information or recommendations back to their department afterwards.<sup>691</sup> Sometimes such promises to report back were accompanied by a prediction from the steward that their members would refuse the offer, an indication of the clarity of their mandate and of the importance of workgroup democracy. One discussion in August 1966 reflected this tendency. Following pressure from management and Etheridge to drop their claim, two indirect stewards asking for a bonus payment for increased flexibility agreed to report back on negotiations to their section, but declared they were 'going to the membership' but did not 'think the membership would consider it reasonable in terms of what they [were] giving in return'.<sup>692</sup> Such patterns were peculiar to the form of workplace culture that existed in this period and despite being ostensibly economic in nature, incorporated not just a sense of collective material self-interest, but also considerable social and moral content.

### *The effects of autonomy*

It was this workgroup democracy that produced in some shops the intense group discipline discussed in the previous chapter. Both Stoke and Longbridge

---

691 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/57, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 26-28 January 1965.

692 Etheridge Notes, 16 Aug 1966.

feature cases during this period where sections either demanded higher discipline or enacted their own punishments against members defying the workgroup. The crimes cited were of various types - ignoring votes, refusing to contribute to union funds, not paying subscriptions or strikebreaking – but all ultimately amounted to a refusal to accept collective decisions.<sup>693</sup> In one example at Stoke such behaviours even included collective sanctions for being disruptively militant, with one steward being de-selected and replaced, then ostracised by his co-workers.<sup>694</sup>

In addition to forging an internal discipline that could be unforgiving towards reluctant trade unionists and rule-breakers, attitudes regarding the inviolability of shop-based democracy complicated interactions with senior stewards, factory organisations and official trade unionism. Although as both Reid and Laybourn have argued, such relationships could never be reduced to a simplistic opposition between rank-and-file and bureaucracy,<sup>695</sup> the independence afforded to workgroups contributed to the idea that trade union officers were not always to be trusted, a sentiment particularly intense amongst an enthusiastic left-wing minority. The activists who wrote to the libertarian socialist magazine *Solidarity* were particularly vehement in this regard, using their dislike of union officials as an explanation for virtually every defeat or compromise. They often felt, according to Brian Jeffreys, a TGWU member at Dagenham, that negotiations were a case of 'what will the union bastards give

---

693 Etheridge Notes, 29 November 1967; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/68, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 16 May 1969; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/88, Letter, 3 Paint Shop Stewards to Works Committee, 18 October 1967; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/84, Letter, View Room Steward Elton to Works Committee, May 1967; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/82, Letter, Trentham Finishing Line Stewards Brother Moore and Brother Elton to Works Committee, March 1967; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 April 1966; CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1966.

694 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 7 March, 4 April 1966.

695 Alastair Reid, *The Tide of Democracy : Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain, 1870-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 2-12, Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, p. 158.

the Company this time'.<sup>696</sup> Jeffreys' attitude echoes ideas prevalent at Halewood, where many interviewees habitually described senior officials as 'bent'.<sup>697</sup>

However, it is easy to exaggerate the spread of such ideas. Whilst the *Solidarity* writers did reflect genuine sentiment amongst many, as Tony Lane notes, accusations of "selling out" usually boiled down to disagreement over what constituted a reasonable compromise.<sup>698</sup> In most factories, and even at Cowley Assembly (where relationships would later turn so sour), full-time officials and stewards were generally on good terms in the mid-1960s.<sup>699</sup> Despite a long history of full-timers imposing unfavourable agreements, the limited impact of such interventions under sectional bargaining often mitigated against more dramatic intra-union conflict. Since officials had little involvement in the vast majority of strikes in this period, AEU leader Bill Carron's opposition to unofficial strikes might irritate activists, but for the majority of workers it had little practical effect on their actual rights.<sup>700</sup> If anything, workers simply felt disconnected from the activities of union leaders, an attitude confirmed by a lack of interest in national union elections, and in the branch meetings which connected them with the wider union.<sup>701</sup>

Workers were generally engaged in workshop decision-making, and their attitude towards higher levels of the union reflected a mixture of lack of interest, and confidence in their own autonomy, something that could manifest itself as bloody-mindedness. Peter Ashcroft, an NUVB steward at Luton, wrote to *Solidarity* about one such dispute in 1966, hinting at the nature of this

---

696 Jeffreys, 'Too Old at 50', p. 22.

697 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 112, 223, 299.

698 Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong*, p. 174.

699 Longbridge AGM, January 1964; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/1, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, April to August 1967.

700 Henderson, *Life on the Track*, p. 63.

701 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 99–102.

stubbornness. Ashcroft described how during one national dispute 'all these worthy gentlemen [local union officials]' came to the plant 'to wave the white flag' and successfully persuaded the majority of stewards of 'their duty to lower the temperature on the shop floor'.<sup>702</sup> One workgroup decided to ignore both their officials and the JSSC, beginning a wildcat strike for improved pay, citing line speed and poor conditions as motivation. Management subsequently conceded a small increase in the form of "condition money".<sup>703</sup>

Ashcroft's story illustrates a number of pertinent factors in motor industry conflict in this period. Attributing the more moderate attitudes of fellow stewards to their right-wing Labour politics and loyalty to government incomes policies,<sup>704</sup> Ashcroft reveals how rare his ideological hostility to union officials was amongst activists there, and confirms the dominance of conventional ideas about industrial relations at Luton. This was especially evident in factory-level decisions, like the company-wide secret ballot held to decide the outcome of national pay negotiations. The reaction of Ashcroft's section is interesting. Despite the factory having decided to accept the company's offer, his department opted to walk out, suggesting that his argument that they should ignore the district officials and JSSC was received favourably. Even if it is unlikely that most members shared their steward's politics, this action points towards the possibility that his ideas reflected, at least in part, a wider desire for union autonomy on the part of his members. The reference to "speed up" and "bad conditions" is also significant. The department evidently organised a workgroup meeting in which they defined the national pay dispute in a distinctive way. Rather than the discussion being primarily structured by public discourse about industrial relations, the meeting was shaped by shared personal experiences of bad working conditions. That is, the more isolated from wider societal culture their discussions were, the more likely it became that

---

702 Ashcroft, 'More about Vauxhall', p. 5.

703 Ashcroft, 'More about Vauxhall', p. 6.

704 Ashcroft, 'More about Vauxhall', p. 6.



workers in Ashcroft's department would think and act in ways that transgressed norms.

### *The rationality of shop-based decision-making*

Allied to the sectional independence guaranteed by the social practices and cultural norms discussed in Chapter Four, broad ideas about trade unionism – autonomy, workgroup decision-making, the necessity of collective solidarity - helped to shape workers definitions of problems and situations. As both their values and social practices pointed toward the workshop as the most important locus of their social power, workers in most factories used shop meetings and steward representation as a means by which to reach a consensus and act collectively. One consequence of this was that their collective decisions were partially shielded from the prevailing public discourse. Workshop discussions made issues intensely local, generally excluding thoughts of wider themes regarding union power. Thus, even where workers theoretically accepted many prominent criticisms of unions, within their own workshops, in practice, they could determine issues in quite distinctive ways.

The logic behind the 1968 Dagenham sewing machinists' strike is one example of this. That the strike entered Britain's collective memory as a fight for “equal pay” rather than the more prosaic reason that actually prompted the walkout testifies to the disconnect between mainstream public discourse and shop-floor rationality. As Sheila Cohen has argued, the chief complaint of the strikers was that the company's new job evaluation scheme had been applied unfairly, failing to recognise the sewing machinists' skills.<sup>705</sup> River Plant convenor Henry Friedman recalled how over a series of meetings the women eventually reached 'a kind of instinctive assumption ... that if the job requiring similar skills

---

<sup>705</sup> Cohen, 'Equal Pay - or What?'.

had been traditionally performed by men, it would have been graded higher'.<sup>706</sup> Through workgroup meetings where they cited their own experiences and made comparisons with other groups, they reached a conclusion about Ford's grading structure that contradicted both management's assumption that job evaluation was "scientific" and mainstream ideas about gender and skill.<sup>707</sup>

That the media were only capable of rendering this as a more universally comprehensible idea – "equal pay for equal work" - reflects how factory politics had created a distinct world, with its own meanings and values. Whilst for mainstream newspapers the sewing machinists' strike was broadly seen in a positive light precisely because it raised a political issue conventionally seen as beyond industrial relations, for the women involved the boundary between the political and the industrial was one crossed only with great caution. Thus, it was the features of their dispute most commonplace in trade union terms – wage and skill comparison – which gave them their legitimacy.<sup>708</sup> Consequently, even after they had "won" their dispute by reaching an agreement on equal pay, many of the strikers remained frustrated that their grading grievance remained unrecognised.<sup>709</sup> Their discussions at shop level had shaped their attitudes towards the dispute in ways which only fully made sense in the context of their historically-specific pattern of shop-floor bargaining.

Many small strikes at this time drew on this capacity to define issues in localised ways which rarely touched on broader industrial relations issues. Not once, for instance, did I encounter any dispute in the Longbridge works convenor's notes between 1965 and 1968 that invoked the universal themes of

---

706 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 130–131.

707 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 125–135, 150–152, 157–180.

708 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 130–135.

709 Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, pp. 170–174; 'Made in Dagenham', *Woman's Hour* (BBC Radio 4, 2010).

“wage drift” or “restricted practices”.<sup>710</sup> Instead, disputes drew on the values of factory trade unionism to make arguments that were highly localised. In negotiations, stewards cited problems like: the increasing burdens of their job, the length of time they had endured their grievance, particularly unpleasant conditions, the comparative injustice of their pay, failures to properly consult or unrecognised skills.<sup>711</sup> These arguments were mobilised in defence of actions that management routinely considered “outside procedure”, but that the workers understood as legitimate within the context of their experiences.

These parallel definitions of everyday situations sustained a wide range of conflicts, particularly pay disputes. Although for employers (and many commentators), sectional wage disputes piled additional “wage drift” on top of nationally negotiated wage rises, fuelling inflation and hurting the economy, in partially insulated workgroup discussion, such broader concerns often failed to disturb the moralistic arguments around pay claims. One fairly typical week at Longbridge in May 1969 provides a number of examples of this, with Etheridge called to attend ten different disputes, each one reflecting highly localised versions of union values.<sup>712</sup> The variety of these disputes is testimony to the myriad different types of friction decentralised bargaining was capable of generating: many that week were economic, in most cases direct requests for more money, and could very easily be incorporated into Goldthorpe’s “collective instrumentalism”. However, despite their underlying economic content, they expressed a very precise attitude to work and wages which invoked ideas that went beyond a simple collective expression of economic self-interest.

One dispute in the East Works demonstrates the moral aspect of shop-floor

---

710 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/58-67, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 1965 to 1968.

711 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/59, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 18 August 1965; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/60, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 22 November 1965; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/61, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 2 February 1966; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/62, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 9 May, 12 May 1966.

712 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/68, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 12-16 May 1969.

politics. The works committee met with four stewards, Brothers Piniker, Call, Carr and Brown, and two senior managers, Mr. Galloway and Mr. Savage. The stewards represented a section in the East Works producing cylinder heads, which had walked out the previous night in protest at a supply shortage. Piniker outlined the nature of the dispute, recounting a litany of grievances: the line was 10 years old and the machines in bad condition, there was a shortage of components and a bad flow of work. The stewards were also worried that no new jobs were being allocated to them and that surplus labour might soon be thrown up. The works committee responded by asking Piniker if he had registered a formal "failure to agree" with management. 'Considerable discussion' ensued, after which the works committee recommended an immediate return to work for negotiations, a solution that Piniker agreed to try and persuade his members to adopt.<sup>713</sup> This dispute was in essence simple. Management's failure to supply adequate components meant work was interrupted and earnings lost. The workers' losses had also stimulated other fears and grievances, with Piniker expressing frustration at working on slow machines which were prone to breakdown, a widespread feeling that the North Works Cylinder Heads Shop was being given priority, and raising worries about potential redundancies in the future.

Prior to the walkout Piniker and his members had clearly discussed their situation in a way that went beyond economic calculation. The variety of associated grievances implies an open discussion, which touched on general job and wage security. The stewards argued that the company had no right to expect workers to be present at the factory without providing them with adequate machines and sufficient supplies with which to earn their wages, and also demanded equal priority in the distribution of work. Finally, worries over the likelihood of redundancy led to the expression of fears for the future and a general mistrust of the company. Other disputes that week applied different

---

713 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/68, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 12 May 1969.

criteria, with another workgroup asking for increased wages to reflect new work content. Rectifiers in the assembly block claimed recent changes meant that rather than simple rectification, they were now additionally engaged in machining, changing valve blocks, “general” rectification and fault finding. The steward concerned justified his complaint by claiming that management was obtaining more skilled work for no extra pay.<sup>714</sup>

The issues raised by these groups reflect Hyman's assertion that 'spontaneous strikes', whatever their official motivation, are often manifestations of long-term discontent over a broad range of issues.<sup>715</sup> Thus, in the background to “pay disputes” we find a set of implicit moral assertions which diverge from the simple economic rationalities typically attributed to them. Behind the cylinder heads grievance was the injustice that despite being available for work, the company was failing in its duty to provide the requisite materials. The rectifiers thought it unfair that the increased skill content of their work was going unrecognised and announced their intention to return unilaterally to their old practices. Neither section was arguing simply for a wage increase and both had a non-economic justification for their demands, drawing on ideas of equality (with other groups), fairness (from management), consent (for co-operation in change) or merit (from skill).

These criteria - that a group of workers had the right to expect treatment no worse than their peers, that management should fulfil its formal and implicit obligations to the workers, that change of whatever sort should be negotiated, agreed and compensated for, that skill and merit should be properly recognised - were employed routinely when organising collective action. Crucially in terms of this thesis, such arguments drew out of necessity on sectional autonomy, a micro public sphere in which workers conceived of disputes through criteria

---

714 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/68, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 13 May 1969.

715 Hyman, *Strikes*, pp. 43, 129.

*they* devised, rather than on the terms defined in wider public discourse. That they were able to do this was a function of their social practices and social organisations, which allowed discussions within their workshops that were partially isolated and conducted in terms of ideas specific to their experiences. These debates were shaped not just by a simple collective self-interest but were a particular form of calculation determined by their forms of organisation and structured by their shared values.

Sectional trade unionism thus made a major contribution to how car workers thought and behaved during the mid-1960s. Although surveys continued to indicate that worker attitudes remained broadly mainstream during this period, within the *habitus* created by the social practices and cultural norms discussed in the previous chapter, car factory activism developed a distinct value system based on a number of interrelated assertions regarding their rights to consultation, to participative democracy and to group autonomy. Those values helped to reinforce, spread and sustain collective behaviours, even beyond the piecework sections where it had initially been taken up with most enthusiasm. Practices and values simultaneously shaped the pragmatic rationalities employed by workers during discussion and collective action. Sectional autonomy and participative democratic decision-making both enabled in practical terms and morally justified what was discussed, how it was discussed and what was decided.

The effect of this combination of factors was the pattern of strikes that Britain's motor industry saw in the mid-1960s: a plethora of small, short, unofficial, strikes generally beyond the control of national union officials, and beyond the understanding of most mainstream public discourse. These developments had several notable effects. Firstly, they enabled car workers to continue to forge new rights and expectations. Secondly, car company managers began to perceive a real decline in their capacity to exercise unilateral control over the

workforce. Thirdly, in line with Silver's theory regarding the importance of class conflict in shaping the development of capitalism,<sup>716</sup> the large number of short strikes and the disruption they were perceived to cause, motivated governments and companies to reform their industrial relations policies in an effort to solve the crisis that shop-floor activism was felt to be causing.

## **The introduction of productivity bargaining: 1968-71**

Having disaggregated workers' power from that of unions in previous chapters, I have been able to show how the forms of democracy that grew up around sectional bargaining were central to collective cultures in Britain's motor industry and add nuance to our understanding of industrial conflict in the 1960s. We have seen how whatever effects economic and political changes may have had on their living standards, the ways in which car workers organised helped shape how they thought about their rights, the demands they made of their employers and the forms of collective action they took. Partially insulated from critical public discourse, workgroup democracy gave people a space in which to develop a localised shared interest and collective rationality, without necessarily having to confront the influence of national politicians or press. This helped car workers to advance new collective claims over a wide variety of issues and develop new expectations, a shift often missed by historians and sociologists convinced that only individualism could be novel in this period.

Confronted by the inability to suppress this disruption, employers subsequently shifted towards the reforms mentioned in previous chapters, where shop-floor bargaining was institutionalised. At Ford, this manifested itself in a series of new agreements on grading, discipline and productivity that aimed 'to regain control by sharing it', in the hope that steward involvement in the reform

---

<sup>716</sup> Silver, *Forces of Labor*, pp. 1–40.

process would reduce shop-floor conflict.<sup>717</sup> At Rootes and BL, reform came through MDW, first introduced at Linwood in 1962 and expanded to its original Coventry plants in 1967 and 1968. In the words of Rootes director George Cattell, the purpose of the reforms was the 'complete elimination of bargaining about money or payment between the operator and the rate-fixer' putting management 'in a much better position to control its labour costs'.<sup>718</sup> At BL, introduction took longer, not reaching the main assembly facilities until 1971.<sup>719</sup> In both cases, these productivity bargains were part of wider reforms aimed at reinforcing management control across the economy, which firms hoped would 'get rid of the assumptions and attitudes' that had allowed 'efficiency to languish'.<sup>720</sup>

### *Sectional autonomy and attitudes towards change*

Responses to these schemes were varied and shaped by the social practices and cultural norms of the period, as well as the histories of particular factories. Although historians of the motor industry, including Tim Whisler<sup>721</sup>, have often assumed that this period saw a relatively uncomplicated shift from bartering over piece rates to annual wage negotiations and effort bargaining, there was no easy transition between different types and scales of activism, as different forms of action often required the creation of new solidarities and values. Indeed, although the difficulties firms later experienced in implementing productivity bargaining have sometimes been attributed to the same causes as 1960s disorder – multi-unionism, demarcation and differentials – some elements of sectional bargaining actually facilitated reform.

---

<sup>717</sup> Words borrowed from liberal industrial relations scholar and Donovan contributor Allan Flanders, see: Friedman and Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict*, p. 77. For details of the expansion and institutionalisation of the steward role at Ford see: Tolliday, 'Ford and Fordism', p. 98.

<sup>718</sup> Cliff, *The Employers Offensive*, p. 52.

<sup>719</sup> Lyddon, 'The Car Industry, 1945-79', p. 200.

<sup>720</sup> Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, p. 85.

<sup>721</sup> Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 227.



Decentralisation may have been the greatest strength of workgroup democracy, but the limited space it provided for wider industrial politics could make resistance to broader managerial initiatives more difficult. In the case of MDW at Stoke, members and stewards discussed the new wage structure in ways that reflected their feelings of limited responsibility for problems outside their shop. Thus, sectional objections presented at JSSC meetings focussed not on a critique of the scheme but on its material effects *within* the workshop. In July 1967, a sectional meeting for workers in the body and paint sections had a 'forceful discussion' on the system, but only over the role anticipated for stewards.<sup>722</sup> After partial implementation other groups began to complain about speed up, with the trim department stopping work on 4 September to protest against an increase from 18 to 22 cars per hour.<sup>723</sup> The following month engine workers struck for a similar reason, beginning two months of intermittent conflict over work standards.<sup>724</sup> Stoke workers complained to their stewards as speed increased, discipline tightened and timekeeping became stricter, without forming a general critique.

This parochial approach was mirrored by the behaviour of senior stewards. TGWU convenor Nelson declared in November 1967 that 'no steward should discuss MDW on his own basis or sanctions may be put against him.'<sup>725</sup> Nelson actively sought to prevent shop meetings from becoming spaces in which workers could autonomously develop policies on issues which did not directly concern only them. In part, such attitudes may have been encouraged by the relative conservatism of the leadership at Stoke, where JSSC meeting minutes

---

722 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 3 July 1967.

723 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 September 1967.

724 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 2 October, 6 November, 13 November, 4 December 1967.

725 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 13 November 1967.

were interspersed with a variety of warnings against precipitate industrial action and regarding the precarious financial health of the company.<sup>726</sup> The tendency of the Stoke workers to think only about local problems was reinforced by the idea, promoted from above, that uncontrolled discussion of wider issues was potentially divisive. Sectional autonomy guaranteed the right of a workgroup to walk out over a dirty workshop or a rude supervisor, but not to discuss substantial changes to wage structure and work organisation.

In another sign of the complicated nature of “collective self-interest”, despite acknowledging the adverse effects of the plan on earnings and working conditions, AEU convenor Wild urged colleagues to accept it because: ‘MDW was being introduced at BMC and in time would spread throughout the motor industry, in order to be competitive and to cut out the PW [piecework] system’.<sup>727</sup> It was a persuasive argument, with stewards voting against rejecting the plan. That they did so despite having voiced regular complaints about it, was evidence that many of them shared Wild's lack of enthusiasm for all-out conflict over major changes, preferring instead to fight sectional battles over the details. This shared idea, that factory activism should try to restrict itself to everyday issues rather than more general questions of control, perhaps reflected an element of self-preservation, with more prosaic issues less likely to provoke conflicts they felt ill-prepared for.

### *Defending sectional autonomy*

As companies reformed collective bargaining methods during the second half of the 1960s, the sectionalised pragmatism that was the defining feature of shop-floor trade unionism mitigated against major factory protests. However, those optimistically expecting that the promise of prosperity under productivity

---

726 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/1, Rootes Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 4 April, 27 May, 3 July, 5 September 1966.

727 Rootes JSSC, November 1967.

bargaining would be readily accepted by grateful workforces everywhere were to be disappointed. For every workplace where schemes were adopted peacefully, another was forced to impose it in the face of opposition from a hostile workforce. Just like the inertia at Rootes, the reasons behind the antipathy of many workers often lay in the values which had developed under sectional bargaining, and when organising resistance worker activists drew on ideas that reflected the world of the workshop.

At Cowley, where senior stewards were particularly opposed to the proposed changes, articles in the factory newspaper *Branch News* reflected their line. 'We are convinced that if Measured Day Work is accepted everyone in this plant will suffer for years to come.'<sup>728</sup> The co-authors – Bob Fryer, Reg Parsons and Alan Thornett - attacked the plan in detail, warning of the dangers of relying on annual pay reviews: 'Piece-work is the only system that will produce money. Piece-work operates day after day at shop steward level on price review.'<sup>729</sup> The ten-page article went on to articulate how the new agreement would allow management to move labour and determine work standards unilaterally, and that new "penalty clauses" meant unofficial collective action would result in disqualification from holiday bonuses and lay-off pay. Summarising the changes, the authors wrote 'we will have no control whatsoever under the Company's proposals. Manning is controlled by the Company through individual Company-fixed man assignments and the speed of the line is in Company hands.'<sup>730</sup>

*Branch News'* rejection of MDW was forthright and detailed. Emphasis was repeatedly laid on the right to be consulted over change, the diminished role of stewards and the ability under piecework to improve wages through shop

---

728 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Bob Fryer, Reg Parsons and Alan Thornett, 'British Leyland Measured Day Work Proposals - Analysed', *Branch News*, December 1970, pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

729 'British Leyland Measured Day Work Proposals – Analysed'.

730 'British Leyland Measured Day Work Proposals – Analysed'.

bargaining. A similar logic prevailed amongst a group of IS stewards at Longbridge, who wrote a series of articles in a monthly factory bulletin, in which they expounded on management's intention to introduce MDW 'to increase the intensity of work, to control labour costs and thereby increase profits: to reduce the power of the shop stewards, whilst increasing productivity by as much as two-fold.'<sup>731</sup>

In 1972, The Austin works committee, perhaps pressured by the activism of their IS competitors,<sup>732</sup> also produced a brief leaflet on the subject, expressing similar objections. 'Under the existing Piecework system we have a large measure of control over how much wages we will earn, the amount of work to be performed for these wages, and the opportunity to re-negotiate piecework prices if the material, or means of production change, or by mutual agreement.'<sup>733</sup> The leaflet went on recount the history of workers' power at the factory, won by the struggles during and after the war, and culminating in the level of control enjoyed by workers there now, concluding that 'this is what employers wish to put an end to by introducing Measured Day Work'.<sup>734</sup> What these various approaches shared was an invocation of all the rights that had been encoded into the social practices of car factory trade unionism during the heyday of decentralised bargaining.

### *Fighting MDW and productivity bargaining*

Subsequently, the fight against MDW unfolded in ways that were reflective of the precise form of these values at particular factories. At Cowley Body, the negotiation process was relatively smooth, reflective of the general tenor of

---

731 CB, MSS.152/1/5/12, Birmingham International Socialists, "Measured Day Work, What It Is and How to Fight It Number 3" (handbill), 1969.

732 Henderson, *Life on the Track*, p. 76.

733 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/161, Austin Works Committee, "Statement on Measured Day Work" (handbill), 1972.

734 "Statement on Measured Day Work".

trade unionism there. A leaflet co-authored by local official David Buckle and TGWU branch officers Bill Roche and Tony Williamson outlined the JSSC's collective thoughts on MDW:

*The Branch [TGWU 5/60] has always said, that while it would look at any proposals, it did not intend to accept new conditions unless they were an improvement on the Pressed Steel Piecework System, which has provided good pay and few strikes.*<sup>735</sup>

Like the stewards at the Assembly plant, the factory leaders at Cowley Body agreed that piecework bargaining had been good to them, but their response was distinctive in praising the system for delivering hard work and few strikes.

5/60 Branch assured their members that management were entitled to try and impose the proposals and that resistance would be costly. 'BLMC is adamant that, for economic reasons, it will not have piecework. Therefore the only means of maintaining [it] ... would be through ... an all-out strike involving everyone in the plant.'<sup>736</sup> The senior stewards evidently had little appetite for such a struggle, and decided instead to follow the advice of their national officials and 'to see if ... full "mutuality"' could be obtained.'<sup>737</sup> The proposals for such a mutuality scheme, which elsewhere was only offered as a concession after strike action,<sup>738</sup> were then outlined in full, in order to discuss them at a mass meeting the following month, where workers voted to accept the new document. Work on the Morris Marina began under the new system shortly after.<sup>739</sup>

---

735 ATC, MSS.391/3/32, TGWU Branch 5/60, "To Change - or - Not to Change?" (handbill), 3 February 1971.

736 "To Change or Not to Change".

737 "To Change or Not to Change".

738 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 223.

739 CB, MSS.152/1/5/12, Don Harte and Jock Wight, 'Big Struggle Against MDW at BL Plants: Bosses Try to Weaken Stewards', *Carworker*, April 1971, p. 4 (p. 4).

The outlook of the Cowley Body stewards was reflective of their broader levels of trust in management, and the values of their organisation. Whilst Roche, Williamson and Buckle asserted an ongoing right to consultation at sectional level, the 5/60 Branch stewards were prepared to accept assurances from the company that work standards would not be imposed on them. In the course of negotiations the company had been persuaded by TGWU officials to commit to an additional 30 minutes of relief time per shift and drop a clause allowing them the right to determine line speed unilaterally – a feature of MDW at Ford.<sup>740</sup> A combination of moderate leadership and timely concessions helped management bring in MDW relatively painlessly.

At the assembly plant, the implacable hostility of the senior stewards generated more conflict. In September 1970, 1,200 trackworkers were sufficiently convinced by the leadership's opposition to walk out in protest. A week later, management raised the proposed hourly rate, meaning workers were now fighting *against* a substantial pay rise. The strike nevertheless continued for a further seven weeks and ended only after pressure from full-time officials to return to work.<sup>741</sup> Management then pushed the scheme through the official dispute procedure and imposed it in January 1971. Having struck against it once, the assembly workers evidently did not think it worth another try and MDW was forced in without agreement.<sup>742</sup>

The Longbridge stewards attempted a different strategy, perhaps reflective of their less dogmatic approach. Instead of trying to mobilise all assembly workers in defence of piecework, they localised the issue. After being told that management would be conceding no more piecework increases – preparing the

---

740 "Big Struggle Against MDW".

741 Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 44–45.

742 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Reg Parsons and Tom White, 'North Side MDW Negotiations', *Branch News*, March 1971, pp. 1–3.

ground for MDW<sup>743</sup> – the JSSC announced it would 'give full support to any section or department' fighting back.<sup>744</sup> The first section to take them up on their offer was the Trim Shop. The stewards for the sewing machinists reported in January 1972 that the company had for some time tried to persuade them to accept MDW. In accordance with the JSSC policy they demanded an increase in prices equal to what they were being offered on the new scheme (15 per cent). When this was refused they took their demands through procedure and on 7 January took constitutional strike action. The works committee immediately organised a collection on their behalf, declaring that:

*The sewing machinists [are]... on dispute on an issue involving the vast majority of employees at Longbridge. The time has come for financial help for the 130 girls involved. Please give generously to this section which is carrying the flag on behalf of you all.*<sup>745</sup>

The nature of the dispute was revealing in a number of ways. Firstly, that it was the women of the sewing room putting themselves forward to challenge the scheme is evidence of the adoption of decentralised bargaining amongst women car workers (see Chapter Four), in spite of the patronising attitudes towards them from male stewards reflected in the reference to the 'girls'.<sup>746</sup> Secondly, the adoption of this decentralised approach is testament to the degree of faith many car workers invested in sectional militancy. The autonomy of workshop trade unionism was both a reason to fight MDW and a means by which it could be fought. Yet the outcome of the dispute reflected the limitations of this approach. At a JSSC meeting, the sewing machinists called on the other

---

743 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/158, Austin Longbridge International Socialists East Works Bulletin, November 1971.

744 "Statement on Measured Day Work".

745 RAE, MSS.202/SJ/3/2/162, Austin Longbridge Works Committee, Sewing Machinists Dispute (Collection Sheet), January 1972.

746 Anne-Marie Sweeney, 'Women Making Cars, Making Trouble, Making History', in *The Factory and the City: The Story of the Cowley Automobile Workers in Oxford*, ed. by Teresa Hayter and David Harvey (London: Mansell, 1993), pp. 116–39.

stewards to support them or to 'let them off the hook to discuss alternatives [to piecework]'.<sup>747</sup> Understanding the extent to which their small struggle was being used to fight a wider battle, the sewing machinists asked for greater backing to confront management. The JSSC preferred to compromise, and voted (with a substantial minority against) to allow discussions on MDW and to send the sewing machinists back to work.<sup>748</sup> Negotiations then continued, with the women taking the opportunity to remedy long-standing grievances surrounding low pay in exchange for being the first and last group to fight MDW at Longbridge. They eventually reached a satisfactory conclusion, winning a substantial interim pay rise whilst the finer details of MDW and mutuality were ironed out.<sup>749</sup>

At Ford, although the wage structure had always been MDW, the 1960s reforms prompted a similar reaction, again demonstrating that ideas of sectional autonomy and shop democracy were derived as much from the spread of certain cultural values amongst the workforce as from the industrial relations system itself. In 1969, the firm introduced a new pay and productivity agreement aimed at improving discipline, including a penalty clause which disqualified workers from lay-off pay and holiday bonuses for 6 months if they were involved in a strike outside of agreed procedure.<sup>750</sup> On 19 February 1969, despite support for the new agreement from most officials on the National Joint Negotiating Committee, and from Minister of Labour Barbara Castle, Halewood, followed shortly by Swansea Transmission Plant, stopped work in protest. The strike spread quickly to other Ford factories at Dagenham, Basildon, Langley and Southampton, eventually involving 38,000 workers, and continued for a month, only coming to an end when Ford agreed to reduce significantly the

---

747 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/161, Minutes of the Special Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting to Report on the Sewing Room Dispute, 21 January 1972.

748 Longbridge JSSC Sewing Room Dispute Special Meeting, 21 January 1972.

749 Longbridge JSSC Sewing Room Dispute Special Meeting, 21 January 1972.

750 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 251.



money conditional on good behaviour.<sup>751</sup>

Interestingly, despite Ford employees never having worked under piecework, the arguments behind the 1969 strike reveal considerable overlap with the values employed in the fight against MDW elsewhere, reflecting the importance of sectional bargaining in their own laborious process of organising. Like BL workers, activists at Ford described the penalty clauses in terms of how they threatened workers' rights within the workshop. One worker, Jimmy, expressed this logic in the most forthright terms, worrying that defeat would mean a return to the domination by supervisory staff and unconstrained line speed that had been common in the early 1960s. : 'If this one [the penalty clauses] gets through. If they get away with this one it will all be up. We'll be back to Victorian times. The ball and chain won't be in it. We'll have lost everything... the lot.'<sup>752</sup>

As elsewhere, Ford workers' response to productivity bargaining reveals the importance of social practices in shaping the rationalities and behaviours of car workers. Crucially these responses only begin to make sense to us when we move beyond conceptions of straight "instrumental collectivism" and place workers' objections and actions in their proper historical context. Although responses were uneven, in every factory they were structured as much by what the social practices and the collective values of sectionalism enabled them to do, as by the actual effects of the plan. At Stoke, workers who had become accustomed to sectional independence and relatively conservative factory activism stymied discussion of MDW and restricted objections to aspects of the new plan. At Cowley Body strong traditions of sectional rights created opposition, which management overcame by making key concessions and drawing on strong relationships with key activists. Similar objections based on ideas of sectional autonomy, shop democracy and consultation, drew workers

---

751 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 243–288.

752 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 244.

at Cowley Assembly and Longbridge into conflict with BL management that reflected their specific factory organisations. Finally, at Ford the introduction of productivity bargaining in 1969 produced conflict on an unprecedented scale, derived perhaps from the more precarious state of workers' rights at Ford. Although each factory had similar motivations to resist or accept productivity bargaining, their individual perception of what constituted a reasonable response was not subjected to a universal economic rationality, but mediated through their particular workplace *habitus*. This produced very different results, ranging from simple firm collective bargaining at Cowley body, up to the 10-week strike that unfolded at Jaguar.<sup>753</sup>

### **Productivity bargaining and the high tide: 1970-74**

As Howell notes, for politicians and policy makers the hope was that the new productivity bargaining regime would spread best practice, ushering in Shanks' era of 'enlightened self-interest' (see Chapter 2) with comprehensive agreements improving efficiency and reducing conflict.<sup>754</sup> For managers the expectation was that the new regimes would allow them to exchange higher wages for greater efficiency, by removing worker resistance to new working practices.<sup>755</sup> For most union activists, the key during negotiations had been securing a future for sectional democracy and maintaining a degree of control over their lives at work. Negotiations over the implementation of MDW and productivity bargaining reflected these concerns. Confronted by mass conflict at Cowley, partial disruption at Longbridge and potential unrest elsewhere, management made concessions. The most important of these was the general principle of "Mutuality". During their campaign against MDW, one of the major issues raised by opponents had been the potential for management to unilaterally impose work standards. Consequently, in addition to the financial

---

<sup>753</sup> Tolliday, 'High Tide and after', p. 223.

<sup>754</sup> Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 102–110; Shanks, *Stagnant Society*, pp. 123–135.

<sup>755</sup> Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, p. 95.

incentives workers were offered to accept the new scheme, BL agreed to consult over line speed, a promise which subverted the scheme's central purpose; the re-establishment of control over production. Thus the changes reflected not only the desire of the state and employers to restore order through better labour relations policies, but also the ways in which workers had reshaped the scheme; either through negotiation or confrontation.<sup>756</sup>

Alongside “mutuality”, productivity bargaining brought further new developments. With the abolition of piecework, wage rates were now fixed in annual negotiations, largely ending “wage drift”. Another major change was the introduction of formal agreements outlining collective rights, which in the 1970s became genuinely comprehensive. For example, the 1973 Indirects Agreement for Longbridge, covering 7000 workers, setting out rights regarding time study, grading, movement of labour, security of employment, lay off pay, disability and holidays, ran to 27 pages.<sup>757</sup> In addition to their breadth and formality, these new types of agreement were also extremely detailed. At Cowley, the Industrial Engineering agreement contained a series of promises regarding the precise rules under which management would be able to conduct time studies: 'The Industrial Engineers will inform the Superintendent of their intention to study an operation... in advance and the appropriate steward will be advised by the Senior Foreman'. Finally, the steward would be permitted to check that 'all conditions are normal and that the study will reflect normal operating conditions'.<sup>758</sup> Agreements like this conceded considerable formal rights to workers, building on and superseding the “custom and practice” negotiations of the 1960s. Employers looked to reduce conflict by formalising rights and responsibilities.<sup>759</sup>

---

756 Buckle, *Turbulent Times*, pp. 36–38; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 55–56.

757 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/80, Austin Longbridge Indirect Workers Agreement, 1973–74.

758 ATC, MSS.391/3/32, Cowley Assembly Plant Formula for the Application of Industrial Engineering Techniques, 21 December 1971.

759 Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report*, pp. 45–46, 75–76; Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 42, 87–99.

### *Mutuality and the morality of productivity*

Despite hopes of less fractious industrial relations, the first half of the 1970s saw an increasing number of strikes.<sup>760</sup> Whilst these developments have often been attributed to the effects of inflation and incomes policies,<sup>761</sup> this section will look to explore the ways in which worker culture under the new regime also helped to shape industrial action during this period. As we saw in Chapter Four, in many cases, new arrangements stimulated a response in factory organisations, where activists remade their social practices in order to conduct factory trade unionism on a larger scale. Both the new agreements and the new organisational capacities were reflected in attitudes to working life and the shifting values of this period offer us substantial insight into the forms conflict took within the motor industry, beyond immediate economic motivations.

The extent to which the sectional values of the mid-1960s determined the eventual form of productivity bargaining ensured that substantial elements of the old system were perpetuated. Indeed, this was precisely what many stewards envisaged when they talked about “mutuality”. The Cowley senior stewards celebrated their new agreement, shaped by worker refusals to let management conduct industrial engineering studies,<sup>762</sup> in *Branch News*: ‘This agreement, which provides for full mutual agreement between the Company and the Shop Stewards... gives us all we want in terms of mutuality’,<sup>763</sup> going on to explain that:

*Resulting from a study there must [now] either be mutual agreement*

---

760 Durcan, McCarthy and Redman, *Strikes*, pp. 315–318.

761 Evans and Creigh, ‘Work Stoppages’, p. 14; Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 330.

762 ATC, MSS.391/1/7/4, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 20 December 1971.

763 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Bob Fryer and Alan Thornett, ‘Senior Shop Stewards Report’, *Branch News*, January 1972, pp. 1–5 (p. 3).

*or an agreed temporary arrangement. If the shop steward on the section uses his veto on a proposal the Company then has the right to try and negotiate a temporary agreement so that the job can run. If after a genuine attempt to get agreement on this basis no agreement is reached the change cannot be implemented.*<sup>764</sup>

Sentiments of a similar nature were echoed by senior stewards from other BL factories, including figures on the right like Eddie McGarry, the convenor at Triumph Canley, who told journalists in 1971 that without mutuality the MDW system was 'akin to modern slavery'.<sup>765</sup> For most BL activists, MDW was unwelcome but with mutuality stewards and their sections were at least free to negotiate over workload and working conditions within their department, in much the same way as they had over pay in the previous period.<sup>766</sup>

These attitudes seem to have reflected a wider consensus that stretched beyond senior stewards, translating into a more general rights-based version of the decentralised bargaining workers had practised in the 1960s. It severely impeded the implementation of productivity bargaining as envisaged from above, as arguments over prices and lieu rates were replaced by workgroups disputing work standards. At Longbridge, where workgroup culture had been strongest under sectionalism, disputes over line speed now became more common. Two disputes on 11 May 1972 illustrate the kind of disagreements that emerged. In one, assembly workers complained that the track had been sped from 24 cars per hour to 28. Without consultation management had simply sent extra cars down the line and workers were now tripping over one another

---

764 'Cowley Senior Shop Stewards Report', p. 3..

765 Clifford Webb, 'Triumph Stewards Refuse New Pact to End Piecework', *The Times*, 13 May 1972, p. 19; Clifford Webb, 'Triumph Workers to Hold Mass Meeting on Company Pay Plan', *The Times*, 13 October 1971, p. 20.

766 BLTUC, MSS.228/3, BMC JSSC Meeting Minutes, 18 April 1970; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/102, British Leyland Trade Union Committee Meeting Minutes, 23 October 1968.

in their attempts to keep up. That same day, the Road Test department had also registered “Failure to agree” on a proposed 17.5 per cent increase in work speed, a discussion that was itself interrupted by another dispute.<sup>767</sup>

The nature of these industrial relations problems and the social practices that workers developed around them re-made values regarding the key concept of the new system – productivity. Productivity bargaining encouraged workers to think of workload as an adversarial concern, with stewards' opposition to “speed up” coming to the fore. In factories like Stoke the system's emphasis on driving production forward produced hostility. In 1971 Gerry Jones, a TGWU steward, wrote for *Carworker* – a monthly IS rank-and-file periodical – to express some of his grievances. ‘Although our productivity deal has only been in operation for two years it has become clear that the new power of the bosses is being used to tighten the screw.’<sup>768</sup> Elsewhere, workers at Ford and Vauxhall wrote in similar terms, emphasising the objections to the way work standards could be forced up and pressure put on less able workers.<sup>769</sup> This sort of political writing drew on the popular culture of the shop floor, which saw productivity as an area of conflict with their employers - perhaps the greatest divergence in attitudes between workplace union culture and wider public discourse.

In conjunction with these changes, many lineworkers seem to have developed an ambivalent relationship to work itself. Under piecework, the bonus system had given them a partial investment in high productivity, offering immediate rewards in exchange for commitment to fast work. Steve Gallant, who began as a material handler at Solihull in 1970, remembered how pieceworkers used to plead with maintenance workers to restart the line after breakdowns: ‘do what

---

767 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/75, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 11 May 1972.

768 CB, MSS.152/1/5/12, Gerry Jones, ‘Modern Slavery in Coventry Is Responsible for Speed up and Work Study’, *Carworker*, June 1971, p. 3 (p. 3).

769 Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 138–143; Spartacus, ‘The Vauxhall Struggle’, pp. 3–4.

you can to get the track going – get it going, it's money...'.<sup>770</sup> Shop-floor documents from Longbridge also show disputes in this vein, with pieceworkers complaining about management's inability to provide a steady flow of work and sometimes demanding compensation for breakdowns.<sup>771</sup> Elsewhere, Cowley body plant workers Kathy Moxham and Johnny Moxham, both recalled how the piecework regime had driven them to find ways to produce ever faster in order to drive up their earnings.<sup>772</sup>

Under productivity bargaining such motivations disappeared. Ann Holmes, a fairly apolitical steward in the Solihull Stamp Shop in the 1970s, summed up new attitudes: 'Once you'd done your 64 [the work standard for her operation] – well we were only on measured day work. I'm doing no more.'<sup>773</sup> Eddie Squires, a moderate activist who worked on the P6 assembly line, outlined in detail the kind of customs that arose in the wake of productivity bargaining: 'say there was four men missing... then people would start but they'd only do their own job'.<sup>774</sup> Workers often refused to do any tasks outside their negotiated work standards and kept a close eye on line speed, with Squires' shop nominating a worker with a stopwatch to count the number of cars.

Squires' description of completing his quota then stopping was one of many examples of workers' lack of moral investment in production, a type of 'effort drift' that Tolliday also sees happening in Ford's large factories.<sup>775</sup> This phenomenon often manifested itself as a simple withdrawal of consent for higher productivity and Solihull convenor Joe Harris noted the rapid shift in

---

770 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/46, Steve Gallant Interview, 25 July 1983.

771 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/82, Austin Longbridge Joint Investigation into Transmission Case Section, March 1967; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/57, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 1 February 1965; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/63, Letter, J. Field to Works Committee, August 1966.

772 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 84.

773 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/17, Ann Holmes Interview, 10 November 1982.

774 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/34, Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983.

775 Tolliday, 'Ford and "Fordism"', pp. 95, 100–108.

bargaining strategies that took place after the introduction of MDW - 'we argued time then rather than money and of course we didn't have the same motivation [as under piecework].' Harris also noted that the tendency to minimise labour also now disappeared.<sup>776</sup> Others recalled a more general lack of interest in production. Stan Hill, who had worked as a butcher and a builder prior to coming to the Solihull Paint Shop in 1958, recalled life under MDW as lacking motivation. 'I mean if you was paying a man the same money for working or doing nothing, it's hardly likely that he had any... incentive to work.'<sup>777</sup>

Sometimes this lack of motivation translated into more direct work avoidance. Brian Bird and Steve Gallant both claimed that under MDW some workers used to stop work early having finished their quota,<sup>778</sup> a practice apparently also common elsewhere.<sup>779</sup> Another group of workers interviewed in the Solihull Paint Shop claimed that some engaged in secret drinking.<sup>780</sup> Alison Gilmour's study of work culture at Chrysler Linwood features similar attitudes towards productivity with other examples of this lack of interest in management objectives; workers' claiming that theft, sleeping and drinking at work were commonplace.<sup>781</sup> Although Gilmour counsels caution with regard to such claims, aspects of these memories certainly tally with the general attitude prevalent at the time.<sup>782</sup>

Whilst some, like Stan Hill, felt the union went too far in putting in 'the big boot' over productivity, the general idea that output was management's responsibility pervaded industrial relations and collective culture. Once official work standards

---

776 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/3/39, Joe Harris Interview, 3 February 1983.

777 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/32, Stan Hill Interview, 5 July 1983.

778 Brian Bird Interview, 1 December 1982; 'Steve Gallant Interview, 25 July 1983; Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983.

779 Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983; Paul Thompson, 'Playing at Being Skilled Men', pp. 60–61; Gilmour, 'The Hard-Boiled Bunch', p. 100.

780 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/3/10, Interview with a Group of Workers on the "Wet Deck" Section of the Rover Solihull Paint Shop, 1979.

781 Gilmour, 'The Hard-Boiled Bunch', pp. 95–133.

782 Gilmour, 'The Hard-Boiled Bunch', p. 104.



were achieved, many felt they had fulfilled their terms of employment, regardless of whether they were working to their absolute limit. Even workers engaged in behaviour outside the norms of what might be called acceptable skiving – sleeping, drinking etc. - were rarely actively informed on, although wider support was unlikely for workers caught “bang to rights”.<sup>783</sup> Popular attitudes towards work built on the nature of productivity bargaining and activists' responses to it, feeding into conflict over Job Evaluation and “speed up”. After the long campaign over MDW, workers at BL were certainly aware of the possibility of management trying to drive up effort and workers elsewhere often reached the same conclusion when firms unilaterally raised track speeds. As one 1973 leaflet distributed by Halewood supporters of Autonomist Marxist group *Big Flame* put it, for many workers the only alternative to 'frantic line speeds, atrocious job conditions and manning levels' was shop-floor solidarity, an attitude they expressed through a radical re-understanding of the meaning of work, with the slogan 'What we all want is a line speed of 0'.<sup>784</sup>

### *The logic of agreements*

Workgroup culture under productivity bargaining had further effects that contributed to high levels of day-to-day conflict. Within the four large firms, the introduction of “comprehensive agreements” which outlined in detail the formal rights and responsibilities of workers and management, often had the effect of converting their content into contested ground. They also had the effect of legitimising complaints and collective action whenever management failed to fulfil promises, and workers frequently based their conflicts during this period on

---

783 Gilmour, 'The Hard-Boiled Bunch', pp. 118–121, 136, 160; Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 139, 223.

784 Big Flame, 'An Open Letter by a Group of Halewood Ford Workers to Their Brothers and Sisters', *Big Flame 1970-84*, 1972 <<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/open-letter-leaflet.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2015].

the need to defend formal rights. This can be seen in the written propaganda produced by stewards' organisations. A works bulletin produced by the Longbridge Works Committee in June 1974 provides an excellent example. Confronted by the deteriorating economic situation of the company, the works committee looked to reaffirm their rights thus:

*We have no doubt that management will attempt to take advantage of this situation. It is our fear that in this period standards that will be disadvantageous to our members may be imposed. During the three-day week [due to the 1973-74 Miners' dispute] the efficiency rate soared, with this experience behind them, no doubt a similar exercise will be attempted during this period.... Any steps taken that cut across our interests must be resisted. More than in any period in our history the Works Committee see the need to be firm and to resist any attempt to erode the working conditions that we have established and to insist that ALL agreements are honoured... UNITY and VIGILANCE are the WATCHWORDS.<sup>785</sup>*

This handbill is indicative of a wider moral sense that agreements constituted fundamental rights which the company should never abrogate. In a parallel way, management attitudes towards these agreements were conceived of as temporary expedience, which the firm would abandon if they felt confident of overcoming resistance.

These ideas played themselves out in everyday conflicts at Longbridge, where union members routinely stopped work in 1972 and 1973 over violations of their formal rights in various areas, including shop conditions, discipline, grading and

---

<sup>785</sup> RAE, MSS.202/S/J/4/2, Austin Longbridge Joint Shop Stewards Bulletin Number 1, 6 June 1974.

pay.<sup>786</sup> Similar problems were also a feature of discussion on the Solihull Production SSC, where workers complained when the company failed to fulfil their responsibilities over transfers, provision of boots, safety problems, upgrading, health and safety, time study arrangements, demarcation and even the tea trolley service.<sup>787</sup> Not all of these conflicts related specifically to agreements but they spoke very clearly of the new expectations that workers were developing. Whereas in the 1960s members fought in defence of “custom and practice”, by the 1970s demands were being articulated in the form of fundamental rights, without which management should not expect them to work.

The result was often a situation where workers would walk out whenever conditions were unacceptable, as described by Eddie Squires:

*One of the main things you used to have there [in his department] was the fumes... where they put the underseal on. Now it didn't happen all the while, and I don't know what caused it, but every now and again... the next group along ... used to [be] overcome by fumes and they used to have to walk – well they used to just go outside, tell the foreman and ... he'd probably agree with them and tell the superintendent, who was up in his office, he'd say, oh there's nothing wrong, at the end they used to just walk out every time the fumes came.*<sup>788</sup>

---

786 Over the course of this period there were hundreds of these sort of strikes and it would impractical to list them all here. The following references point to some typical examples, see: RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/74, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 10 February 1972; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/75, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 9-12 May 1972; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/76, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 28--30 November 1972; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/77, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 7 February 1973; RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/78, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 21 August 1973; Etheridge Notes, 12 November 1973.

787 PWAIR, MSS.356/1/8/2, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 9 January, 6 February, 13 February, 13 March, 5 June, 26 June, 10 July, 28 August, 9 October 1973.

788 Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983.

The idea that the workers were obligated to work only after management had ensured conditions were adequate reflected a strong sense of job ownership. In the end, the dispute in Squires' section was only resolved when management agreed to nominate a worker responsible for the state of the shop. 'They picked a chap and he was nicknamed the Official Sniffer... because when we used to say the fumes were bad this chap used to come up and used to go sniff-sniff-sniff, carry on working.'<sup>789</sup>

These conflicts could easily be aggravated by a sense that petty violations anticipated graver changes. From 1971, management at Cowley and elsewhere found that formal agreements, far from averting conflicts by channelling disagreements into formal bargaining, actually caused them. Whilst management complained that "status quo" clauses (which left production unchanged until after agreement) prevented them from making necessary adjustments to production, workers claimed that management regularly violated formal deals. Consequently, much conflict concerned not new demands, but the defence of existing agreements. In summer 1973, there were a number of disputes at Cowley along these lines. One incident in the Mechanical Maintenance Department concerned a breach of the discipline procedure by a supervisor. Under a 1965 agreement, if the foreman, the steward and the member concerned agreed a disciplinary reprimand, it could be entered on the offender's record card. If no agreement was reached then the company had to prove the offence in a multi-stage disciplinary procedure. On this occasion, one superintendent decided to bypass the procedure and unilaterally impose punishment. The result was a protest to upper management, who decided to support the superintendent. The workers then went on strike to defend their agreement, at which point the punishment was withdrawn.<sup>790</sup>

---

<sup>789</sup> Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983.

<sup>790</sup> ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, 'Maintenance Dispute', *Branch News*, August 1973, pp. 2–3.

Like so many issues that provoked strikes in this period, fighting for the removal of a reprimand against one man was simultaneously trivial, a vital precedent and a matter of principle. Trivial because it was just one man and just a reprimand, a vital precedent because the car industry had a long history of supervisors abusing their powers and a matter of principle because the company was breaching a long-standing agreement, part of the promise given to the workforce as a condition for their work. Such a dispute could have several after-lives and often demonstrated to workers the need to buttress formal rights through everyday activism. That same summer was marked by many similar disputes, including one group of storekeepers in the Service Division fighting management attempts to impose a new working system. They claimed that conditions in the shop had previously been appalling, with only a strike in May 1971 forcing the company to modify pallets and introduce a night shift to reduce dangerous congestion. Reacting to proposed changes, P. Evans, the senior steward commented:

*They cannot see anything in the Company's proposals that would be to their advantage. They also know that the Company gave them nothing in this area. They had to fight and lose wages to wring these conditions from the Company. So it's what they have, they hold.*<sup>791</sup>

A similar determined attachment to the status quo can be seen elsewhere during this period, with a strong sense of formal rights becoming more widespread, representing a subtle shift in long-standing attitudes regarding sectional autonomy and consultation.<sup>792</sup>

---

791 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, P. Evans, 'Service Division Report', *Branch News*, August 1973, pp. 5–7 (pp. 5–6).

792 Mathews, *Ford Strike*, pp. 196–199.

Workers increasingly complained that it was *management* who were breaking procedure by failing to provide adequate working conditions.<sup>793</sup> This can be seen in the way they occasionally demanded compensation for being *forced* to go on strike. Workers at Cowley made just such a claim following a dispute in November 1973. Complaining, after a series of accidents, that conditions in the tyre bay were unsafe, the workers walked out and called in a government safety inspector, who confirmed the problems and asked the company to rectify them. After a stoppage, the Company issued safety shoes and the dispute was resolved. The workers then claimed compensation for time lost walking out: 'We told the Company that since the conditions in the tyre bay were unsafe and the Company have no right to ask people to work in unsafe conditions they should pay the money.'<sup>794</sup>

The workers understanding of this dispute indicates an underlying set of values regarding job ownership and their right to make a living. In this vein they asked the company to compensate them for having to stop work as a result of management provocation. Such demands represent the culmination of a process whereby factory organisations developed the social power to make formal rights a reality, sectional organisations developed the habit of defending agreements, and workers began to see management as responsible for both their working conditions and their living standards. This created a fruitful context for both mass wage strikes, and disputes large and small around workplace conditions. Whilst changes in political and economic circumstances in the early 1970s, including government interventions in industrial relations, inflation and faltering economic growth, undoubtedly played a significant role in these developments, without this wider value system and the organisation that lay behind it, much of the heightened conflict in everyday life at British car factories could never have taken place.

---

<sup>793</sup> Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 172.

<sup>794</sup> ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, 'Claim for Time Lost in the Tyre Bay Dispute', *Branch News*, November 1973, p. 7.

### *Politicising the everyday*

In addition to showing how conflict came about in daily life, the disputes above show how, in contrast to the previous period, productivity bargaining politicised the “everyday” in ways that decentralised bargaining had not. I noted previously a tendency for broader ideas to be lost in the more prosaic attitudes that characterised 1960s sectionalism. In the first half of the 1970s however, with comprehensive agreements, stronger central factory organisations and an influx of new factory activists (see Chapter Four), more disputes seemed to carry wider ramifications, with a reprimand for a worker in one department putting into question the whole dispute procedure. One manifestation of this change was the way in which sectional issues began to be thought of, with bodies like Stoke JSSC now discussing disputes in terms of “broken promises”.<sup>795</sup> As a result any sectional dispute could now potentially raise issues related to factory-wide agreements, meaning an increase in the number of local workshop problems discussed by the JSSC. Having barely discussed any sectional dispute at all between 1966 and 1968, the committee looked at 84 between 1970 and 1972.<sup>796</sup>

Simultaneously, the scope of activity dealt with by factory organisations also changed. Instead of simply managing the autonomy of sectional groups, they were now being asked to negotiate annual pay reviews and comprehensive bargaining agreements. Whilst, as we saw in Chapter Four, winning workers for major strikes was never straightforward, the moral values that underpinned sectional action could sometimes also be mobilised in support of large factory disputes, particularly over broken promises. Certainly the Stoke IS branch used this logic, their September 1973 factory bulletin citing a number of disputes

---

<sup>795</sup> CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/3, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 2 April 1973.

<sup>796</sup> CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/2, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1970-1972.

which they attributed to company violations of their expectations, including a deal they claimed the company had made that their 'wages would be kept on a par with the district average' and the victimisation of 2 stewards, which they claimed broke 'every procedure in the book'.<sup>797</sup> Stoke IS members felt that 'this company has done nothing but provoke various sections of its workforce ever since it has been here'.<sup>798</sup>

The Stoke stewards were not always the most successful in persuading workers to take strike action, but the idea behind the bulletin – that it was the company breaching agreements and depressing living standards that lay behind the need for strike action – built on the kind of values workers were using in their everyday disputes and did produce major industrial action elsewhere. Between 1970 and 1974, *Department of Employment Gazette* recorded 59 prominent pay disputes involving more than 1000 workers, including indefinite strikes, as well as other incidents where companies backed down after overtime bans, work to rules or threats.<sup>799</sup> Concepts cited like “parity” were an important part of these claims, building on ideas about “fairness” that had long characterised sectional strikes.<sup>800</sup>

Whereas sectionalism tended to discourage the mobilisation of large groups, the increased levels of factory activism I discussed in Chapter Four, potentially widened the range of subjects to which workplace-specific values could be applied and consequently amplified the forms of collective action that were

---

797 CUK, MSS.315/C/10/1, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor International Socialists Bulletin, 19 September 1973.

798 CUK, MSS.315/C/10/1, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor International Socialists Bulletin, 19 September 1973.

799 'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1970', *Department of Employment Gazette*, May 1971; 'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1971', *Department of Employment Gazette*, May 1972; 'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1972', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1973; 'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1973', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1974; 'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1974', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1975.

800 Murden, 'Demands for Fair Wages and Pay Parity in the British Motor Industry in the 1960s and 1970s'.



possible. A process similar to that described by Silver, with workplace conflict provoking a managerial fix, which in turn produced new forms of unrest, eventually culminated in a greater number of large sustained strikes, and even on occasion mass factory occupations, as factory organisations discovered that their new social practices could be turned to new types of behaviour. At the high point of “sit-ins” in British workplaces, between 1971 and 1975, some 190 took place across a range of industries, generally in opposition to redundancy.<sup>801</sup>

### *Redundancy*

During the 1970s, redundancy and rationalisation became an important issue. Alongside the Heath government expressly committing itself to allowing unprofitable firms (“lame ducks”) to go bankrupt, car company profits were weak throughout most of the early 1970s. British Leyland first confronted the problem of rationalisation at a gear box factory, Thornycroft in Basingstoke, Hampshire. Having only acquired the plant in 1962, by the summer of 1971 the company was announcing mass redundancies, a threat that was withdrawn following a six-week strike. The following year BL decided to sell the company to an American firm – Eaton's - declaring that 344 workers would be let go. Subsequent discussion with Eaton's established that further reductions were likely as the American firm were looking to wind down production, then develop the land as offices.<sup>802</sup> Having lobbied the BL Combine Committee for support, a mass meeting then voted to implement a work-to-rule, reducing output by 90 per cent. On the 15 August 1972, having reduced stocks, the workers occupied the factory, declaring 'we are determined to preserve our jobs, and our future. Determined that we will not accept the dole and insecurity.'<sup>803</sup> R. Jones, on behalf of the Occupation Committee called upon 'the entire Labour movement –

---

801 Foster and Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde', p. 297.

802 “Thornycroft Appeal”.

803 “Thornycroft Appeal”.

every section of the working class – to rally to our cause', and asked for financial support through weekly levies and collections.<sup>804</sup> The dispute was finally resolved in October 1972, when the workers' jobs were secured with a promise from BL that further orders would be placed with Eaton's until at least 1976.<sup>805</sup>

The decision of the Thornycroft workers to resist mass redundancy and potential closure through a occupying their workplace seems ostensibly like an escalation of tactics. Yet the appeals show how naturally such tactics could be incorporated into workers' repertoires. By the summer of 1972 workers could look to various successful examples,<sup>806</sup> and amongst many the idea that mass sackings were neither inevitable nor fair was becoming entrenched in this period. Workplace occupations seemed a reasonable step to take, and meaningful preparations to take over factories were made by stewards at other locations over the next few years, including at BL in 1973 and Chrysler in 1975.<sup>807</sup> Several briefer "sit-ins" in response to lay-offs also took place at Ford Swansea and Dagenham between 1974 and 1976.<sup>808</sup>

Above all, as with collective action over everyday issues and pay strikes, the determination to resist redundancy was reflective of the profound degree of job ownership many workers felt at this time, making it more difficult for governments to countenance the closure of unprofitable plants.<sup>809</sup> Not only were

---

804 "Thornycroft Appeal".

805 R.W. Shakespeare, 'Thornycroft Sit-in Ends', *The Times*, 28 October 1972, p. 19.

806 For an exhaustive list of "factory occupations" that took place during this period see: Albert J. Mills, 'Worker Occupations, 1971-1975: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the Development and Spread of Sit-Ins, Work-Ins and Worker Co-Operatives in Britain' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham, 1982).

807 CUK, MSS.315/A/1/1/4, Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Special Meeting Minutes, 7 November 1975; R.W. Shakespeare, 'Chrysler Workers' Threat of Militant Action Growing', *The Times*, 23 December 1975, p. 1; 'Blockade Threat at Linwood', *The Times*, 20 November 1975, p. 21; 5/55 Branch Minutes, 18 Dec 1973; Cliff, *Chrysler Workers*, p. 28.

808 'Workers Lock out Management and Staff at Ford's Swansea Plant', *The Times*, 24 April 1975, p. 20; Cohen, *Notoriously Militant*, pp. 116–119.

809 Since Whisler is writing a history of "Industrial Decline", his perspective treats such power

employers seen to have a responsibility to provide good working conditions, reasonable supervision and unexacting work standards, they were also expected to guarantee a full week's work and full job security. Developing in conjunction with an expanding capacity on the part of worker activists to use these values to persuade workers that mass industrial action was both necessary and viable, such attitudes created new forms of collective action and contributed heavily to increased levels of conflict. Such behaviours undoubtedly made employers extremely hesitant to rationalise production.

### *Engaging in national politics*

The changing context, and the new social practices and values emerging in the motor industry all contributed to the politicisation of the everyday, imbuing seemingly mundane events with deeper meanings. This helped generate not only the industry's strike record, but other forms of politicisation, as shop-floor ideas about trade unionism became less parochial and new interventions became possible, including, between 1969 and 1974, 19 overtly “political” strikes”.<sup>810</sup> Although sometimes initiated by trade union leaders, executive support was usually supplemented by further discussions and votes within factories, as well as campaigns to inform members, without which strikes were often unsuccessful.<sup>811</sup> The campaign against the 1971 Industrial Relations Act followed this pattern with a series of 1-day strikes and demonstrations, called either by the trade unions (often after pressure from activists<sup>812</sup>) or promoted by activist networks like the Communist-led Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unionism.<sup>813</sup> The three largest strikes, all officially-endorsed actions, took

---

as problematic. See: Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 120.

810 McIlroy and Campbell, 'The High Tide', p. 109.

811 Dennis Dwyer, '350,000 Followed Strike Call', *The Times*, 9 December 1970, p. 21; Geoffrey Whiteley, 'Militants' Strike Call a Failure', *The Guardian*, 13 January 1971, p. 1; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 51–55; ATC, MSS.391/1/7/3, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, 23 November 1970.

812 Andrew J. Taylor, 'The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions', p. 157.

813 McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics', pp. 242–245.

place on 12 January, 1 March and 18 March, and each resulted in the closure of most of the motor industry.<sup>814</sup>

The majority of car factory shop stewards were opposed to the act. At a British Leyland Combine Committee meeting in 1970, the assembled senior stewards from all BL factories passed a resolution opposing the legislation and proposed 'a campaign of resistance' against it.<sup>815</sup> As very few factories recorded their mass meetings or secret ballots, it is difficult to gauge how widespread hostility amongst the wider workforce really was, but at Longbridge, the stewards did record the vote taken over the one-day strike against *In Place of Strife*, with 19 departments voting in favour and 13 against.<sup>816</sup> Similar or greater opposition to the 1971 act seems likely, given that it was more draconian and proposed by a Conservative government. Moreover, unanimity amongst workers' representatives, attendances at mass demonstrations and participation in strike action all point toward widespread opposition.

Despite their usual aversion to "political strikes", clearly something in the shared experiences of 1970s car workers made them ill-disposed to support legislation that proposed to punish certain trade union practices with fines. Why this was the case is reflected in the agitational propaganda that activists produced to campaign against the act. Tony Bradley, the left-wing chair of Cowley Assembly's 5/55 Branch wrote to members after the strike on 1 March 1971 attempting to bring home the "industrial" ramifications. Reaffirming standard trade union practice that members shouldn't cross picket lines, Bradley answered charges that the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act

---

814 'Strike by 1.5 Million Closes Shipyards, Car Plants: Rolls-Royce Men Work on', *The Times*, 2 March 1971, p. 1; Alan Hamilton, 'All Main Car Plants Shut for Day', *The Times*, 19 March 1971, p. 1.

815 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Reg Parsons, 'Anti-Trade Union Law', *Branch News*, September 1970, pp. 1–4 (pp. 3–4).

816 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/8/69, Votes by Department for One-Day Strike against *In Place of Strife*, April 1969.

constituted a “political strike” against a government with a mandate for legislation:

*The anti-Trade Union element in our management (which is about 99% of them) are looking forward to this legislation like most children look forward to Christmas. If it is wrong for us to use industrial action against the politicians, it is wrong for the industrialists to use political acts against us.*<sup>817</sup>

Bradley addressed further words to those who had crossed picket lines on 1 March:

*We are conscious of the economic hardships that you are facing, what with go-slows and strikes. Stewards face the same problems. Strikes are not a laughing matter and always used as a last resort. This Government is determined to implement anti-working class laws, they are determined to teach all of us a lesson for daring to try and maintain and improve our standard of living. We must stand together or we will go under.*<sup>818</sup>

Bradley's arguments reveal both the opportunities for politicisation and the limits of political strike action. As with other disputes we see the by now customary denial that conflict was sought or initiated by the workers, citing attempts to avoid strike action. Politically, the act was painted as a ploy by the government and employers to import political power *into* industry, using the state as a way of suppressing the trade unions. A link was also made to the everyday purpose of trade unionism; the maintenance of living standards. Yet

---

817 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/1, Tony Bradley, 'Industrial Relations Bill', *Branch News*, March 1971 p. 11-12 (p.11).

818 'Industrial Relations Bill', p. 13.

there was too an implicit acknowledgement that the unions had no business attacking a legitimately elected government, and that this kind of confrontation could only be justified as a last resort, as a consequence of government itself attacking the conventional purpose of trade unionism. The tone was also noticeably defensive rather than aggressive and escalatory. Only by expanding the nature of the “industrial” as a category could he justify the strike whilst still maintaining the conventional cultural norm discussed in Chapter Four, whereby post-war activists distinguished the “industrial” (pertaining to workers) and the “political” (pertaining to governments).

Ultimately the strikes and protests against the Industrial Relations Act had causes similar to those of elevated strike levels more generally during the early 1970s. Making use of new social practices, workers could now discuss issues on a scale that went beyond the workshop. Then because ideas about fundamental workers' rights and their connection to industrial action were widespread, more politicised workers found a more sympathetic audience for their definition of the act, and were able to convince fellow workers that the ultimate aim of the legislation was to strengthen management at their expense. Such arguments coincided with values that were widespread on the shop floor, and with many workers' experiences of their own employers. Campaigners were also careful to present the legislation as a case of politicians interfering with workers' collective rights, thus failing to abide by the long-standing (imagined) separation of the industrial and political realms. Activists sought to shift the boundary between the two in order to industrialise the political by accusing governments of interfering in issues pertaining to industry. Even if most workers saw themselves as only legitimately concerned with “industrial issues”, the nature of their organisations was such that it could blur the distinctions between the two, lending workers legitimacy for their interventions in the ostensibly political sphere.

## *Individuals and politicisation*

Ultimately, the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act was successful as much because of everyday conflicts as any formal campaign. The tendency of all sorts of groups, including car workers, to ignore the provisions of the act and continue to engage in “unfair industrial practices” - boycotting strike-bound goods, enforcing closed shops and engaging in wildcat strikes - helped deter employers from using its provisions, just as shop-floor conflict prevented the proper functioning of productivity bargaining.<sup>819</sup> In the end, particularly after the Pentonville Five dispute in 1972, in which five dockers arrested under the act were released following the threat of a general strike, the 1974 Labour Government decided that it was better off repealing the act.<sup>820</sup> It is not totally implausible to suggest that it could as easily have been five car workers arrested, for the same reason and with a similar result.

Such events reflected the social power groups of workers had built up over the years. For some, the sense of the agency derived from their organisations was tangible. Livingstone Webb, a Bajan who migrated to Britain in 1956 and went to work at Rover Garrison Street as a material handler in 1969, recalled the sense of power stewards had in the 1970s: 'In the old days they [the members] used the shop steward every five minutes... he'd take it on and he'd walk straight into the office.'<sup>821</sup> Usually, Webb recalled, the steward only bothered with procedure if they were 'a feeble body ... who didn't like talking to the gaffer'.<sup>822</sup> In the 1990s, Tony, a steward at Halewood Body Plant, had similar memories when looking back: 'In the 1970s the role of supervisor was being challenged every day, every hour, because people were confident. It was being challenged more by the workers themselves – it wasn't necessarily coordinated

---

819 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 174.

820 Darlington and Lyddon, *Glorious Summer*, pp. 141–178.

821 Livingstone Webb Interview, 19 November 1982.

822 Livingstone Webb Interview, 19 November 1982.

action'.<sup>823</sup> These sentiments illustrate the contrast between the weakness attributed to unions as institutions,<sup>824</sup> and the strong sense of agency felt by workers themselves at the point of production. Whilst for Webb, this sense of power was reflected only in his direct attitude towards work, for others, in the context of workplaces where politics began at the factory gates (where all manner of political groups sold their papers<sup>825</sup>), participation in these kinds of activities also contributed to broader personal politicisation.<sup>826</sup>

Many of these newly politicised activists were more comfortable talking about the politics of everyday factory life than their (often pragmatic) predecessors in the Communist Party had been.<sup>827</sup> Bob Ashworth, who came to Solihull in 1967, aged 20, having lied about his age in order to earn an adult wage to support two young children, arrived with little idea of becoming an activist. 'When I went to work there I had no trade union consciousness, I had no political consciousness at all. I was just a worker, desperate for the reasonably paid job.'<sup>828</sup> Working in paint rectification, he began complaining about the existing steward's inaction: 'He said, if you're so damn clever why don't you do the job. And I said, look anybody could do the job better than you, and yes I would. And he resigned and I got elected and I pitched in, totally ignorant of everything.'<sup>829</sup>

Subsequently, Ashworth's initial experience as a steward was frustration at the then convenor, who seemed to block everything he wanted to do. However, under the sponsorship of Mick Clark and Joe Harris, two older left-wingers and future convenors, Ashworth remained involved and became more politicised.

---

823 Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, p. 204.

824 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 357; Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question*, pp. 339–340.

825 Henderson, *Life on the Track*, p. 70.

826 Martin Lopez, *The Winter of Discontent*, p. 72.

827 RAE, MSS.202/S/J/3/2/64, Convenor's Report to the Austin Longbridge JSSC Annual General Meeting, 1 January 1968; Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict', pp. 65–67; Paul Ferris, *The New Militants: Crisis in the Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 79; Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979.

828 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/15, Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979.

829 Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979.



He recalled one incident in particular as his first 'involvement', a case where he secured upgrading for a worker from the Caribbean.

*One of the things that I took up was Joe Lawson... he was a six foot two West Indian gentleman who was an unskilled worker... what we call a trucker... he'd worked there ever since 1964 when the [new P6] factory first opened... and he was still an unskilled worker and yet I only worked there fifteen months and I was on a skilled job. And I'd started on the lowest job. And he came to me and said... Bob, I want upgrading, he says, you know, I've got a lot of abilities and I – you know I shouldn't be on this job.<sup>830</sup>*

When Ashworth raised Lawson's case with management he met with considerable resistance, including overt racism. In the end he and Lawson had to threaten to take the case to the race relations board before they could get Lawson upgraded.<sup>831</sup>

Ashworth's experience of politicisation reflected the way in which social power shifted people's understanding of the world and their role within it. Upon arriving at Rover, he was exposed to a world which offered possibilities and frustrations. He saw other groups going on strike and wondered if similar behaviour might rectify problems within his own shop. Presented with the “political” problem of racism within factory life (an issue of increasing importance in national public discourse), he saw how to confront it through his access to the wider social power of the union.<sup>832</sup> Finally, he was exposed to the politics of more experienced stewards. This was the beginning of a journey that would take him into and then out of Militant, and eventually to a job as a full-time union officer.

---

830 Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979.

831 Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979.

832 Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979.

Other activists had similar experiences of how factory life could bring out political tendencies of which they had previously been unaware. Colin Fitzer experienced a similar form of politicisation. He recalled meeting Bill Mullins, another member of Militant, to discuss the Industrial Relations Act. Together, he and Mullins collated all the material he had on the act, and gave talks at sectional meetings, proudly noting that he and Mullins overwhelmingly persuaded the 100 people in attendance to oppose the legislation.<sup>833</sup> Never a member of any political party, Fitzer thus found himself part of a group of young stewards trying to exhort the wider workforce to take action against government legislation. Both these forms of politicisation illustrate how the experience of shop-floor power, even in a factory like Solihull which was never particularly strike-prone, inspired some workers to make political interventions with national repercussions. Other workers who became involved in extra-parliamentary left politics in this period cited workplace activism as having been a contributing factor in terms of developing their politics.<sup>834</sup> Arriving at their car factories with uncontroversial views, their ideals were reshaped by new experiences.

That such experiences were generated by factory life can be seen in the propaganda produced by the parties some of them joined. The pamphlets, bulletins and rank-and-file papers produced by groups like IS, the WRP and Big Flame all drew on the genuine values of the shop floor, which they then fed back to fellow workers in slightly more politicised ways. Big Flame's propaganda at Halewood reflected this, politicising the everyday, drawing on the existing social power of the workgroup and rendering the political more commonplace. One factory bulletin produced in 1975 featured articles about the latest company contract, a dispute over clocking in at Halewood, a discussion of workers' rights to "washing-up time" and an article on the new productivity

---

833 Colin Fitzer Interview, December 1982.

834 Hughes, 'Young Socialist Men', pp. 172–178; Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 207–210.

agreement at Dagenham. These were followed by articles on wider themes, including two pages on the future of the motor industry and an international page featuring strikes at Fiat and Seat.<sup>835</sup>

An article on clocks was a classic exercise in “politicising the everyday”. Management had introduced mobile clocks so the workers could punch in whilst preparing for work, rather than queueing after the bell. The workers responded with a boycott: ‘A section of the night shift from around the trim lines waited until the buzzer went until they clocked in, making the point that they clock in the company’s time and not theirs.’ In response, the workers were laid off but then stayed in the locker room. Eventually management backed down and *Big Flame* claimed an important victory for the workers, linking the whole dispute to ‘a general attempt by the company to tighten up discipline’.<sup>836</sup>

As with many of the other cases mentioned above, this discussion in *Big Flame* about mobile clocks reflected both workers’ strong sense of their rights and of their fragility. A dispute over when they were supposed to clock in and its effect on a fraction of pre-shift time was as an example of Ford’s desire for control and therefore viewed in the wider context of industrial power politics. In the context of an ongoing contest between the workplace organisation and management, and at times (for instance, with regards to the Industrial Relations Act) between the trade union movement and the state, for *Big Flame* members seemingly insignificant events took on a new dimension. Despite being in a minority politically, the values and the rationality they espoused in this kind of story remained, I argue, a part of wider workplace culture, their political ideals representing just one strand of a value system capable of containing a multitude of attitudes and orientations. Whilst the majority of members (and

---

835 *Big Flame*, ‘Ford Bulletin No 2 Halewood’, *Big Flame 1970-84*, 1974  
<<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/halewood-bulletin-2.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2015].

836 *Big Flame*, ‘*Big Flame Ford Bulletin No 2*, 1974’.

even stewards) would never have defined their ideas about the world in the way *Big Flame* did, they nevertheless shared with them some fundamental values about work and workers' rights. In certain circumstances, be it opposition to redundancy, pay rise campaigns, or even opposition to government policy, those shared values could translate into dramatic forms of action, and partially explain the mobilisations of the first half of the 1970s.

However, whilst the workplace cultures of Britain's car factories found a place for radicals and even revolutionaries, of varying degrees of commitment, much of the time workers who advocated such ideas found only a marginal role. Even when strike levels rose during the "high tide" between 1968 and 1974, the values of shop-floor trade unionism were a more natural fit with the politics of more pragmatic characters. "Apolitical" attitudes like those of Halewood convenor Eddie Roberts, were not uncommon. 'Whenever I go to these [political] meetings I find myself asking, 'What sort of a job would *he* do on the shop floor? What sort of a steward would *he* make? A lot of these political fellas wouldn't have a leg to stand on if they had to deal with Ford management.'<sup>837</sup> As I noted in Chapter One, Roberts was sympathetic to left-wing politics but didn't want it to get in the way of day-to-day matters.

For other workers, the continual invocation of high principle in mundane disputes could be jarring. Steve Gallant was dismissive of the role of the far left, 'I was aware of militants or leftists if you like who cost me money, and other people a lot of money'.<sup>838</sup> Brian Bird went further, denouncing the likes of Mullins and Ashworth as 'crooks'<sup>839</sup> and Martin Kavanagh was equally hostile about the people he saw as 'extremists':

*I've got a certain respect for CP members, because ... they act with*

---

<sup>837</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*, p. 277.

<sup>838</sup> Steve Gallant Interview, 25 July 1983.

<sup>839</sup> Brian Bird Interview, 1 December 1982.

*responsibility... There are other groups like the Militants and Socialist Workers groups which of course are not constructive, they're destroyers... They've got no alternatives, they've only got one idea and that was to pull down the whole fabric, even the foundations and try and build again. Well, it's not like instant coffee, you don't get it overnight.*<sup>840</sup>

Of moderate stewards of Kavanagh's age, this grudging respect for the "responsible" CPGB was typical, as was their distrust of younger Trotskyists. Yet, as he acknowledged in his remark about instant coffee, both were an intrinsic part of the same world, with the same expectations and rationalities. This culture, through its sustained workplace organisation and basic shared values, made it possible for both Kavanagh and Ashworth, along with large numbers of their co-workers, to express their views and forge a consensus about material issues around which collective action could be based.

### **The social contract: 1974-77**

The high tide of industrial militancy in the motor industry can be explained by a two principal factors. In addition to external causes (inflation, taxes, full employment, incomes policies), it was the one period when car workers in many factories developed both the motivation and capacity to engage in the intense democratic practices necessary to sustain collective action and a broad (if limited) politicisation. However, as the varying forms politicisation took indicate it was always an uneven mobilisation, based on a mixture of contingent events and diversely-motivated participants. Moreover, although workers were encouraged by their peers to perceive issues in more political ways, they were

---

840 Martin Kavanagh Interview, 21 February 1982.

also constantly being reminded of long-standing ideas about strikes being fundamentally “industrial” in purpose. Within the context of the 1970s the boundary between what was considered industrial and political shifted to incorporate wider types of collective action. However, this expansion in what workers could legitimately look to affect through collective action was always fragile and under the changing economic circumstances of the mid-1970s, cracks started to appear more regularly.

For British car companies, 1973 marked the beginning of a crisis that would eventually see a massive decline in sales. From the workers' perspective, whilst the health of the British motor industry had long been declining in relative terms, their own companies had generally continued to expand employment and post a profit. However, in the financial year ending April 1974, BL's pre-tax profits collapsed from £51m to just £2.3m, whilst Vauxhall's losses increased from £4.1m to £18.1m. Chrysler's 1973 £3.7m profit turned into a £17.7m loss, culminating in another government bailout. Only Ford weathered the storm in 1974, although at the low point of the crisis, their profits too declined to just £8.7m.<sup>841</sup> Thus in the 1970s the British motor industry began to feature in public discourse not just as a sector with dysfunctional industrial relations but as one with companies in real danger of disappearing. As discussed in Chapter Two, workers were often at the centre of these narratives and increasingly called upon to confront how strikes were damaging their future livelihoods.<sup>842</sup>

This new economic and political context once again transformed the environment for activists, who as before responded in ways that reflected their

---

841 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 151.

842 For instance, worker productivity and poor industrial relations were a feature both of the 1975 Ryder report which led to the nationalisation of British Leyland and of the discussion around it, see: Don Ryder and Department of Industry, *British Leyland, the next Decade : An Abridged Version of a Report Presented to the Secretary of State for Industry* (London: H.M.S.O, 1975); Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 113–117; ‘The Future Of British Leyland’, *The Times* (London, England, 25 April 1975), p. 17; ‘Lord Ryder’s Bottomless Pits and All That’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 1975, p. 12.

organisations and shop-floor cultures. The most conspicuous shift was that more difficult circumstances strengthened the arguments against strikes. Although signs of fading militancy could be seen at other factories,<sup>843</sup> at Cowley, where activists had most encouraged militancy, the backlash was most fierce. As noted above, workers there responded to the introduction of productivity deals with a succession of small disputes in defence of their new formal rights. Such stubbornness on the part of the workforce did not come without cost, with disputes seeing workers affected by lay-offs and short time. Whilst individual disputes could be justified within the workgroup, outside they could easily be perceived as petty obstruction, particularly by less committed trade unionists in other parts of the factory, who often saw strikes as simply a threat to their pay cheques.

As one anonymous BL employee, writing to Conservative Oxford MP Monty Woodhouse put it:

*My colleagues and I at that plant (Cowley) may be forgiven for thinking that the union official's task is primarily to keep us in full employment. If this is the case, I am wondering how it is possible that out of a possible 43 weeks, I brought home only 22 full pay packets.*<sup>844</sup>

Moreover, whilst an assiduous organisation could build support for an important strike with shop meetings, the distribution of leaflets explaining their case, and the holding of mass meetings or ballots to confirm support, articulating a general case for small-scale, defensive disputes was far more difficult. In the past, advances won in sectional disputes had opened the door to others; now

---

843 Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, p. 207.

844 Keith Renshaw, 'Strikes Cost Me £10 a Week, Says Car Man', *Sunday Express*, 27 April 1974, p. 1.

the only result was likely to be the perpetuation of the status quo. Sometimes even amongst workers positively disposed towards the union, the sensation that this was militancy without end, with little to show for it, certainly grew.<sup>845</sup>

The result of these concerns over excessive militancy was a particularly bitter reform process. In 1973, Reg Parsons, who had joined the Socialist Labour League in 1966 and was an enthusiastic advocate of their policies as late as 1972, began to writing letters to TGWU officials criticising senior stewards and accusing Alan Thornett, Chairman of 5/55 Branch, of behaving undemocratically: 'There are people holding responsible positions [at Cowley] presenting the wrong image of our organisation with increasing[ly] harmful effects'.<sup>846</sup> Parsons accused WRP<sup>847</sup> members at the plant of manipulating workpeople and pursuing 'the road to destruction and revolution'.<sup>848</sup> Whilst he managed to gather a small number of activists (mustered 30 votes in elections for Branch Chair in December 1973), they were not sufficient to oust Thornett from leadership of 5/55, or Bob Fryer as convenor.<sup>849</sup> However, over the course of 1974 the forces ranged against the leaders of Cowley Assembly TGWU multiplied. Following a dispute on the Marina line, management accused Thornett of provoking wildcat strikes through the pages of *Branch News*, and de-recognised him as steward for the Transport Department and as Deputy Senior Steward. The former then struck in his defence, beginning a dispute that lasted 3 weeks and laid off thousands of workers.<sup>850</sup>

---

845 Ann Holmes Interview, 10 November 1982; PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/38, Bill Lock Interview, 8 February 1983; PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/16, Bill Lock Interview, Undated.

846 ATC, MSS.391/3/34, Letter, Reg Parsons to Jack Jones, TGWU General Secretary, 1974; ATC, MSS.391/3/34, Letter, Reg Parsons to Brian Mathers, TGWU Region 5 Secretary, 1973.

847 By this point, the SLL had changed its name, see earlier footnote.

848 Parsons to Jones, 1974.

849 5/55 Branch Minutes, 18 Dec 1973.

850 Geoffrey Whiteley, '£16m Cowley Strike Fades as Shop Stewards Relents', *The Guardian*, 2 May 1974, p. 6; Lyddon, 'The Car Industry, 1945-79', p. 204; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 87-107.



The transport workers' strike received an inordinate amount of coverage in the local and national press, and Thornett became a minor celebrity.<sup>851</sup> Cowley workers' partners and children demonstrated against militancy, bearing signs reading: 'don't strike – work', 'sack the militants' and 'get our dads back to work now'.<sup>852</sup> The Cowley wives' campaign illustrates the extent to which many women were excluded from the alternate public sphere shop-floor trade unionism had created and, ultimately, from occupational class identities more generally.<sup>853</sup> Left outside the decision-making processes that brought about strikes at the factory, the wives who participated in the demonstrations saw less value in the democratic right to choose representatives and blamed strikes on the belligerence of troublemakers. As Carol Miller put it, 'we are fed up with being forced on to the breadline because our men are not allowed to work'.<sup>854</sup> A similar campaign at Chrysler in 1975 manifested the same phenomenon.<sup>855</sup> The inability of workplace organisations to exercise social power outside the factory, which constrained the capacity of workers to act over issues not directly "industrial", also contributed to a sense of isolation from the wider community. That the Cowley Wives movement was eventually countered by mobilisation amongst women who worked at the plant and were more favourably disposed towards the union, reflects the complex patterns by which masculine-dominated

---

851 Colin Pratt, 'Union Backs the Mole... as Wives Get Factory Going', *Daily Express*, 25 April 1974, p. 1; Graeme Bowd, 'The Cowley Wives Are Heading for Victory at Last', *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1974, p. 1; Aubrey Chalmers and David Pryke, 'Strikers back to Work Vote at Cowley', *Daily Mail*, 25 April 1974, p. 1.

852 Edward Laxton and Margaret Hall, 'Carol's Glory Girls', *The Daily Mirror*, 24 April 1974, p. 6.

853 A similar incident took place at Halewood during their 1971 strike. See: Mathews, *Ford Strike*, pp. 128-129. On the exclusion of women from occupational class identities in post-war Britain, see: Sallie Westwood, *All Day Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 13-89; Ruth Cavendish, *Women on the Line* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 136-152; Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997), pp. 74-97; Mary Davis, *Comrade or Brother? : A History of the British Labour Movement* (London: Pluto Press, 2009), pp. 247-262; Anna Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London: MacMillan, 1981) pp. 3-5, 74-106.

854 Pratt, 'Union Backs the Mole'.

855 Graham Andrews, 'Chrysler Wives Clash at Stoke', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 14 May 1975, p. 1.

trade unionism both included, and excluded, women according to their place in the economy.<sup>856</sup>

Thornett was eventually re-instated as a steward, but continued to be banned from serving as deputy convenor. Meanwhile, a TGWU investigation into the strike concluded that the current system of electing senior stewards precluded large numbers of their members 'having a direct influence in their election'. They ordered fresh elections for the convenor's position by secret ballot (unusually) of the whole membership.<sup>857</sup> The result, a resounding victory for Parsons, was greeted with general approval by the local and national press, as well as by local TGWU officials.<sup>858</sup> For some, including Parsons himself, the victory of the "reformed Trotskyist" represented an eternal truth about the majority of the workforce at Cowley, that they were also hostile to the minority of militant activists who led the workers' organisation there.<sup>859</sup> For Thornett himself, the defeat could be explained by the opprobrium that had been heaped upon him and the WRP by the press and the union over the course of 1974.<sup>860</sup> There are elements of truth in both explanations. Press vilification and the TGWU report were probably convincing to a lot of workers and support for the wider policies of the WRP was clearly restricted to a small minority. Yet the militancy of the past five years had necessarily drawn on some genuine support. Indeed, on the section where Thornett was best known, the transport workers were steadfast in supporting their steward. A group of members interviewed for local radio were adamant in their position, invoking the principle that, as one striking driver put it, 'the only people that can withdraw a steward's credentials are the people that elected him.'<sup>861</sup>

---

856 Sweeney; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 105–107.

857 ATC, MSS.391/3/34, TGWU Region 5 Regional Enquiry Conducted at Cowley Oxford, 6-10 May 1974.

858 Raymond Perman; Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 119–120.

859 Colin Pratt, 'Stop the Mole and His Mates', *Daily Express*, 7 January 1976, p. 2.

860 Thornett, *Militant Years*, pp. 119–121.

861 ATC, MSS.391/3/34, Transcript of Radio Oxford Interviews Regarding Thornett Dispute, 19 April 1974.

## *Moderate movements*

Parsons' activism successfully drew on the major contradictions of "militancy"; that it was divisive, that it cost workers money and that it relied on an over-politicisation of the everyday. The increasingly strong "moderate" movement at Cowley and the backlash against the militant left drew strength from the workforce's changing industrial politics after their experiences of the fractious early 1970s. Endless strikes, all invoking questions of principle and requiring significant sacrifices for seemingly little gain, turned many members towards leaders who promised to defend working conditions and living standards whilst reducing conflict. Moderates like Parsons profited from the hostile public discourse discussed in Chapter Two, where militancy was seen as disruptive and shop-floor democracy as compromised. The perception of anti-strike worker Ron Hill that firms should 'listen to the lads who do the work for a change instead of the bloody shop stewards' was not uncommon, and echoed similar attitudes regularly voiced in print and broadcast media.<sup>862</sup> Whilst these sorts of views had always been expressed, in the intimate setting of small workgroup meetings adept stewards could frame disputes in localised terms to which the press narratives seemed less relevant. Now, as workplace organisations began to confront wider themes and engage in major disputes, organising through mass meetings, they increasingly lost the capacity to maintain the isolation from public discourse that had helped sustain the highly decentralised trade unionism of the mid-1960s.

External anti-strike narratives had their uses for moderate activists, but their interventions were also structured by their workplace culture. Groups like The Organisation to Represent Moderate Opinion on Trade Union Matters (ORMO-

---

<sup>862</sup> Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, p. 157; Martin Harrison, *TV News*, pp. 178, 189–190.

TU), a rank-and-file group which hoped to reform the assembly plant union movement (chiefly by expelling the WRP), advocated a form of activism which combined an appreciation of basic trade union values with a rejection of extremism and a determination to avoid unnecessary conflict. The second edition of their bulletin in June 1973 reflected these aims, opening with an article about a Plant Attendants strike which they had supported.

*Before striking, these people patiently took the dispute through procedure and in giving the required notice of intention to strike, they delayed their action so as not to disqualify other workers from receiving their Spring Holiday pay. The strike was officially backed at local level. In other words it was a perfectly legitimate means of trying to improve their conditions.*<sup>863</sup>

Approving of this strike, ORMO-TU wondered why it had not received wider support:

*People feel dissatisfied with the cost to them of other people's disputes. The real reason for this dissatisfaction is that it is one more to add to May Day, the I.E.'s strike, the Tuning strike, the Body Plant strike, the BRS strike, and all the others that have drastically reduced their earnings so far this year.*<sup>864</sup>

As an alternative to these constant strikes, the writers proffered moderation:

*I'm certain a different approach by the Union representation would result in just as many advances with far less losses. I am unhappy, as I'm sure many other people are, that those who ardently and*

---

863 ATC, MSS.391/5/T/2, O.R.M.O.-T.U. Edition No.2, June 1973.

864 ORMO-TU No. 2, June 1973.

*regularly call for a General Strike (to force this government to resign) are in some cases the same people who speak for others who are only interested in preserving good and secure pay and working conditions for themselves.*<sup>865</sup>

ORMO-TU expressed the need for moderation within the same overarching values as their militant opponents did, accepting that ultimately their experience of work was moulded by collective bargaining. In contrast, whilst discussions of the Industrial Relations Act had emphasised the need to strike against illegitimate government attempts to interfere politically in trade unionism, ORMO-TU redirected the “politics” charge towards militant activists, who they saw as ‘using the workers’ livelihoods as a weapon in the fight between political factions.’<sup>866</sup> This accusation was fused with long-standing narratives from public discourse about unofficial strikes, political troublemakers and the need for industrial peace.

Elsewhere, similar forces were at work at different times and places. As the fairly constant exhortations from the Stoke JSSC for moderation throughout the 1960s demonstrate, such forces were a common facet of factory life. However, whereas the limited powers of factory bodies in the 1960s had made this sort of open contest over political leadership uncommon, such divisions became more important, as factory politics became more centralised. Thus whilst “high tide” militancy offered opportunities for new types of collective action and more radicalised ways of thinking, it also opened the door for activist moderates to assert themselves. This could be reflected, as it was it was at Cowley Assembly, in a “anti-strike” movement forged specifically to reduce conflict. Elsewhere, it changed the behaviour of existing leadership groups, who made increasing efforts to control sectional autonomy. This tendency can be seen in

---

865 ORMO-TU No. 2, June 1973.

866 ORMO-TU No. 2, June 1973.

the shift of tone in organisations like the Halewood Assembly JSSC and, in 1975-76, in dropping strike levels more generally.<sup>867</sup> As losses from strikes mounted and the economic situation became more difficult, support for militant policies faded, amongst both the wider membership and the majority of the more pragmatic stewards. That two of the most influential moderate union leaders at Cowley, Reg Parsons and Service Factory convenor John Power, were both SLL apostates, was no coincidence, but again reflected how the politics of individuals were shaped and reshaped by experiences within social organisations.

### *The height of co-operation: Workers' participation*

Reactions to the workers' participation scheme introduced at BL and Chrysler in the mid-1970s reflected the variety that existed within the boundaries of workplace culture at that time. Previously, the growing authority of factory-level institutions had encouraged shop-floor cultures which saw a broadening of the range of issues seen as important to the workgroup and the factory. As industrial expansion in the motor industry ground to a halt, the more developed factory cultures began to demand greater regulation of sectional disputes, primarily to defend earnings, which were increasingly threatened by the perilous economic situation. Amongst senior stewards there was also a gradual shift where activists took on more of the company's concerns about productivity, a process that accelerated as bailouts and nationalisation brought more government pressure to bear on the workforce.

Emerging from near bankruptcy thanks to the involvement of the state, Chrysler and BL were again encouraged by the government to adopt new labour relations regimes as a condition of future investment. At recently nationalised

---

<sup>867</sup> Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, pp. 207–209; Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 178.

BL, revamped collective bargaining procedures were dictated by the Ryder Plan, drawn up by a group of leading managers, politicians, civil servants and national trade union officials. In line with its mixed origins the plan envisaged a successful expansion and investment programme, coupled with a more co-operative industrial relations culture, to be secured through “workers’ participation” - a limited form of co-management.<sup>868</sup> This was welcomed by some activists, both moderates and those close to the CPGB, some of whom, like Derek Robinson (now the Longbridge works convenor) and Peter Nicholas, had been involved in its design.<sup>869</sup> For others within this milieu like Gordon Lee, a senior steward at Morris Engines in Coventry, participation was ‘a challenge to the traditional role of the shop stewards’ movement [but] offered tremendous opportunities for advancement’. Shelagh Conway, representing BL subsidiary SU Carburettors, expressed similar sentiments, declaring that her factory had the ‘same fears and trepidation’ as elsewhere but were hoping that the purpose of participation would become clear in time.<sup>870</sup> Reg Parsons at Cowley was also a firm supporter.<sup>871</sup>

There is no doubt that what attracted some of these activists was their perception that, whether through managerial incompetence or lack of investment, many of the motor firms’ problems were self-inflicted.<sup>872</sup> Publications linked to the CPGB and the Broad Left, a union caucus in the AUEW, had long asserted that most of Britain’s problems stemmed from the inefficient management of British capital.<sup>873</sup> People like Nicholas and Robinson

---

868 Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 176.

869 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 132.

870 BLTUC, MSS.228/3, BMC Combine Committee Meeting Minutes, 15 November 1975.

871 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 135.

872 Lanning and others, *Making Cars*, p. 84; Passingham and Connor, p. 16; Martin Harrison, *TV News*, pp. 234–240.

873 Good examples of this tendency can be found in the Broad Left periodical *Engineering Voice*, published by activists in the AEU, see: Frank Owen, ‘Democracy and Social Ownership’, *Engineering Voice*, Summer 1965, p. 6; R. Bull, ‘Letter to the Editor’, *Engineering Voice*, May 1966, p. 3; ‘Our Classless Society’, *Engineering Voice*, Christmas 1966, pp. 4–6; ‘Woodcock’s Wages Blunder’, *Engineering Voice*, Summer 1965, p. 2;

had been schooled in a political party that had been advocating “workers’ control” of various types since the 1940s.<sup>874</sup> As Robinson put it in his pamphlet on the Ryder Report: ‘Participation offers opportunities to extend workers’ power and democratic control in a publicly owned industry, it could set an example for democratic advance everywhere’.<sup>875</sup>

Conversely, members of the International Socialists expressed opposition to the scheme in no uncertain terms. As Stoke steward Gerry Jones complained after workers’ participation was implemented at Chrysler, convenors were now often away on company-paid trips and were involved in making secret agreements. One member of the IS in Chrysler summed their attitude up succinctly, ‘it wasn’t so much us participating in management, it was management participating in the unions’.<sup>876</sup> For the wider workforce there were more practical objections: principally that many workers had no interest in helping to manage a car factory. Vauxhall operatives interviewed for *The Affluent Worker* in the 1960s had generally been opposed to unions having a say in management, with 59 per cent of those interviewed against the idea,<sup>877</sup> offering a variety of reasons ranging from incapacity, through a lack of interest to the positive affirmation that ‘the men shouldn’t have to run the place’.<sup>878</sup>

For those involved in participation, the new scheme was easy to lose oneself in. Planning meetings pre-supposed that workers and management had to work together to secure a healthy economic future, as one manager put it: ‘We want an input of ideas from you as if you were managing the business yourselves’,<sup>879</sup>

---

‘Workers Control’, *Engineering Voice*, June 1973, pp. 1–2; ‘AEU Elections’, *Engineering Voice*, Spring 1966, pp. 2–3.

874 For more information on “productivist” ideologies in the CPGB see: James Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens*.

875 Thornett, *Militant Years*, p. 146.

876 Cliff, *Chrysler Workers*, p. 21.

877 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 109.

878 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, p. 108.

879 Willman and Winch, *Innovation and Management Control*, p. 104.



so the prevailing logic almost always predicated greater output. Since planning meetings explicitly excluded any issues that were deemed “collective bargaining”, the only topic left to talk about were productivity and efficiency. In theory these topics could have extended to the myriad problems BL faced, such as old machines, low capital ratios and irrationally distributed resources.<sup>880</sup> In practice however, since management and government held the purse strings and resolving such problems involved new investment, management found that they could use workers' participation as a 'persuasion area',<sup>881</sup> and planning meetings often revolved around demands for greater worker discipline and productivity.

Ron Clarke, who was 36 by the time the scheme started and an experienced steward, remembered feeling that he was 'being manoeuvred into a position... the company wanted us to go [to] as opposed to having an open forum'.<sup>882</sup> Another source of irritation was that workers found their shop stewards and convenors routinely disappearing to participate in planning meetings (often 10-11 days a month in the case of Derek Robinson and other senior stewards) almost half their supposed working time.<sup>883</sup> For no discernible gain to themselves, workers saw key activists, who they felt should be representing them, endlessly excused for discussions with management on how to improve efficiency and raise productivity.

Whatever the practical problems, ultimately it was the cultural values pervading the shop floor which determined the extent to which workers' participation was accepted. The most forthright opposition came from those left-wing stewards who had opposed it from the outset. Their contention was that the underlying purpose of the scheme was to secure co-operation with management's

---

880 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 218–219.

881 Willman and Winch, *Innovation and Management Control*, pp. 13–15.

882 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/1/2, Ron Clarke Interview, 10 December 1982.

883 PWAIR, MSS.356/7/2/26, Jack Rosbrook Interview, 24 November 1982.

productivity agenda, an increase that could only be extracted from increased exploitation. Many other workers, whilst not expressing their opposition in the same way, held largely similar opinions.<sup>884</sup> Such feelings were consistent with the lack of moral investment in production we mentioned above, and with the general idea that car work was merely a means of making a living, which carried little intrinsic interest.<sup>885</sup> Car work, whilst generally boring and monotonous, was often relatively untaxing and well remunerated, and many workers had no desire to fit windscreens *and* run the company, for the same end result (profits) and the same reward (wages). With so many car workers uninterested in the scheme, attendance at the various committees dwindled to just 5 per cent of those elected to serve.<sup>886</sup>

A sincere desire to run the company better than management was restricted mainly to moderate activists and Communists. The former saw conflict as intrinsically damaging and the CPGB had long held an ideological belief in productivism, which held that only the workers could “fix” inefficient firms.<sup>887</sup> Such beliefs won influence within the trade union movement, especially amongst officials, like Jack Jones, who broadly shared their values.<sup>888</sup> However, the determination to bring about more control of industry by the state and the trade unions found less of an echo on the shop floor than it did at Transport House. CPGB union leaders who involved themselves in participation risked distancing themselves from members who wished to see their interests represented a more straightforward way. Communists who rejected participation from the outset, like Joe Harris, felt vindicated by its eventual failure in 1979:

---

884 Willman and Winch, *Innovation and Management Control*, p. 93.

885 Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 10–42; Willman and Winch, *Innovation and Management Control*, p. 119.

886 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, p. 229.

887 Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens*, pp. 2–3, 19–23, 168–173.

888 Jack Jones, *Union Man*, pp. 312–316.

*You read all this bloody rubbish about worker directors, you know... it's an absolute fallacy and a nonsense.... there are some people who are naïve and shallow minded enough in political outlook to think that because they can sit and listen to a few [important] figures ... that we are indeed now masters of our fates and our own destinies and all that, and of course it's an absolute load of rubbish.<sup>889</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

These differing attitudes towards participation and the social contract more broadly that emerged in the mid-1970s, were reflective of wider cleavages in terms of values and attitudes that changing forms of organisation were producing at this point. As factory activism became increasingly centralised, stewards of all persuasions – from the older productivist left, through moderates and to a new generation of socialist radicals - were able to make use of new social practices and values to mobilise workers behind their cause. Their ability to do so was premised in the first instance on the social organisations that had first emerged in the 1950s, and which went through substantial changes during the 1960s and 1970s. In each stage different forms of organisation re-shaped the ways in which car workers were able to exercise collective and individual agency, in turn shifting workers' ideas about the nature of their working lives.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that to truly understand the nature of post-war labour militancy in the British motor industry, we must look beyond straightforward economic motivations, accepting that issues like the cost of living were never uncomplicated causes of industrial unrest. Neither the form nor the extent of the 1968-74 strike wave can properly be explained without

---

889 Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979.

disaggregating union power and recognising changes in the distinctive agency that workers generated for themselves in the workplace. Only when we have done this can we begin to grasp the context in which attitudes were formed and pragmatic reasoning employed. Having established such a context in my previous chapters, it has become clear that the voluntary actions of workers, particularly a fraction of engaged trade union militants, were central to a creative process whereby workplace culture in the motor industry was transformed, allowing workers to collectively remake their workplaces. The forms of social power created by this process structured the workplace as a *habitus*, determining how workers took collective decisions and the parameters within which these decisions were taken. This chapter has addressed the results of this process in terms of car workers' attitudes and collective behaviour, and established how collective organising influenced the values and attitudes that predominated in the industry and established the forms collective action took.

Previously, study of worker attitudes during this period had two principal problems: firstly, although attention has been paid to working-class attitudes through sociological surveys since the 1960s, these surveys were usually conducted in line with the tendency we noted in Chapter Three, where scholars often assumed the existence of a process whereby an orientation towards “privatism” replaced “solidarity” in working-class communities.<sup>890</sup> Consequently, scholars have often seen novelty in “affluence” and “privatism” and tradition in collectivism, whilst neglecting emergent forms of the latter. Secondly, this concentration on privatism above all else has usually gone hand-in-hand with the inclination to prioritise the direct economic motivations behind labour militancy. The complimentary relationship between “affluence” and

---

890 Pugh, *Speak for Britain!*, pp. 317–360; Paul Thompson, ‘Imagination and Passivity in Leisure: Coventry Car Workers and Their Families from the 1920s to the 1970s’, in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century*, ed. by David Thoms, Len Holden, and Tim Claydon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 244–69 (p. 247).

“instrumentalism” has only strengthened this tendency.

By examining different sources in new contexts, this chapter has challenged this dominant view. Through looking at life history interviews in conjunction with workplace-based sources I have shown how workplace cultures of the 1960s and 1970s also managed to produce *new* (not re-animated) cultures of solidarity and collectivism, ones which challenged accepted conceptions of work, the economy and democracy. Thus, although Cronin's argument that alternative ideas around co-partnership, participation or workers control never had great purchase amongst British workers may be true for the motor industry,<sup>891</sup> nevertheless car workers *did* develop distinctive ideas about work, structured by their own workplace cultures and in their own way challenging to ideas dominant in the rest of society. During the 1960s, workers produced and re-produced strong sectional bargaining institutions through a strong sense of workgroup identity, which allied to *new* values regarding autonomy, democracy and sectional workers' rights, in turn shaped their collective activism, re-made their workplace and ultimately challenged employers and governments to undertake an “organisational fix” to re-win their consent for production.

Between 1968 and 1974, workers were forced to adapt in response to this fix, remaking their organisations yet again to create wider constituencies for action. The effects of these new industrial relations were once again mediated through organisations and social practices, shaping the kinds of activism that workers engaged in during the high tide of labour militancy. Confronted by a new world in which governments and companies desperately needed productivity bargaining to improve output,<sup>892</sup> worker belligerence in this period can be traced to a shifting attitude towards the very nature of work and employment, and an augmented sense of their own rights and power as workers. The collective

---

891 Cronin, *Labour and Society*, p. 180.

892 Glen O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain : The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 17–49.

behaviour generated during this period, bringing with it a heightened sense of contest over power, swept workers into mass conflict with their employers and the state, as well as stimulating in some a new political consciousness.

Yet the new forms of worker militancy were not without their constraints. Still predicated on a division between the political and the industrial, and struggling to resolve issues of authority and autonomy, democracy and leadership, moderation and militancy, centralised factory organisation was as likely to help as to hinder militancy and, particularly in the mid-1970s, leaders at various different factories made compelling cases for more co-operation with management and an increase in industrial discipline. Like earlier militancy, this appeal was also structured by the culture of solidarity created over the previous period. Even in arguing against strikes, groups like ORMO-TU were forced to ape their main rivals, promising to defend workers' rights vigorously where necessary. The debates between militants and moderates showed how their differences were bounded by the culture of which they formed part, a further fact reflected in their contrasting attitudes towards workers' participation. The views of competing factions towards it each demonstrating their connections to the broader *habitus* in which all workers found themselves.

With this chapter, I have illustrated the following: that the workplace cultures forged, modified and re-produced over the three decades after WW2 where a crucial structuring element in determining what kind of attitudes and behaviours were possible in British workplaces in the 1960s and 1970s; that new collectivism could thrive in the post-war period, not just as a re-animation of previous solidarity but as new inventions in their own right; that the new solidarities and the values underpinning them were as crucial in determining the form of militancy as were economic and political reforms, and finally, that those collective values constituted a significant diversion from conventional ideas about the economy and work, and transformed the meaning of both in

many workplaces.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

In the introduction to this thesis, I emphasised the extent to which the existing historiography of post-war Britain downplayed the historical agency and subjectivity of participants in labour militancy. Highlighting a tendency to prioritise the influence of the state and capital as an explanations for increased workplace conflict,<sup>893</sup> I aimed instead to foreground the agency of workers, focusing on the ways in which their activism enabled them both to re-create their workplace as a *habitus*, and affect national life through their activism. The first step of this process involved restoring a degree of historicity to post-war industrial relations, first by looking at the changing societal norms which structured how workplace activism was understood during this period and then by discerning the historical origins of the “organisation and solidarity” that formed the basic minimum required for sustained collective action.<sup>894</sup> Having established the novelty of post-war shop-floor cultures, I looked to map their contours, analysing the differing forms of workers' power prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, before, finally, focusing on how access to that power marked the attitudes and actions of individuals and organisations.

### *Trade unions and public discourse*

My investigation in Chapter Two of the treatment meted out to trade unions by newspapers, politicians and social commentators looked to re-establish the historical context in which activists operated, particularly how they were seen within the elite public discourse of newspapers, national politics and social commentary. I charted how mainstream coverage of industrial relations

---

893 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 164–175; Wrigley, *British Trade Unions since 1933*, pp. 20–51; Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, p. 185; Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation', p. 160; Maguire, 'Labour and the Law', p. 46.

894 Hyman, *Strikes*, p. 57.



proffered a normative conception of how workers should behave, dividing activities and behaviours into those that were deemed reasonable and those that were not. In spite of the tendency in much of the historiography to assert that post-war labour activism generally fell within the bounds of “reasonable industrial issues”,<sup>895</sup> study of public discourse revealed the extent to which labour militants in general and car workers in particular increasingly found themselves transgressing conventional norms as the post-war period progressed.

Although criticism diminished in the immediate post-war period, even during this high point in public esteem trade unionists continued to be judged by normative standards of behaviour. While trade unions as institutions were being hailed for their contribution to “British values”, groups like dockers, meat porters and busmen were attacked for striking outside of formal bargaining machinery. During the 1950s and 1960s press and politicians settled on “unofficial” strikes, restrictive practices and closed shops as defining features of “the British Disease”, as public commentators connected trade unions with relative economic decline.<sup>896</sup> From 1965, these sorts of ideas led governments to try and reform industrial relations, a process which revealed the norms restricting the role of workplace activists in British society, as reformers like H.A.Clegg and Otto Kahn-Freund promoted so-called “productivity agreements”, in which workers agreed to swap pay rises for increased output. Such ideas, echoing Harold Wilson's 1964 “White Heat” general election campaign, married well with the political tone of mid-1960s Britain.<sup>897</sup> Industrial unrest continued and during the 1970s industrial action was increasingly incorporated into a general

---

895 Laybourn, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, pp. 157–203.

896 Shanks, *Stagnant Society*, p. 68; Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline*, pp. 22, 88–89.

897 On the connections between ideas around the shortcomings of the British working class and narratives responding to declinism like “White Heat”, see: Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, ‘Introduction: The Uses (and Abuses) of Affluence’, in *An Affluent Society?: Britain's Post-War 'Golden Age' Revisited*, ed. by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1–13 (pp. 2–3).

narrative in which union tyranny appeared at times to threaten democracy itself and was blamed for everything from the failures of nationalisation, high government spending, inflation, pensioner poverty, weak governance and general misery. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult for trade unionists to engage in even fairly mundane social practices without committing a transgressive act against “the public”.<sup>898</sup>

Car workers were never far from these discourses. Indeed, lacking the romantic allure of mineworkers and dockers and working in the modernist industry *par excellence*, their behaviour was subjected to the greatest scrutiny of any group of workers. From the late 1950s they became an archetypical example of “the British disease”, fulfilling all the stereotypes of Britain's industrial relations' problems: militant shop stewards, unofficial strikes and low productivity, and, as the arch-villain of 1970s industrial relations, were even held responsible for inflation in addition to the increasingly precarious financial health of the motor industry and of the nation.

### *Forging new social practices*

Despite the constant message, from newspapers, television media and politicians, that “the public” opposed militancy, car workers continued to behave in “problematic” ways. I have argued, contrary to some historians,<sup>899</sup> that their behaviour was not simply a reflection of economic motivations or the opportunities presented by union recognition and full employment. In Chapter Three I asserted instead that the post-war settlement initially changed life in some workplaces less than has often been imagined.<sup>900</sup> Many car firms, whilst recognising the unions, continued to exercise almost unilateral control over all

---

898 Seaton, 'Trade Unions and the Media', p. 258.

899 Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role?*, p. 210; Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role*, p. 152.

900 Todd, *The People*, p. 158.

areas of working life, and militant activism was still regularly punished by dismissal at many factories long into the early 1960s. Trade unionism was often marginal to workplace life and, unable to draw on more confrontational collective cultures, workers often displayed fatalistic and deferential attitudes.

From the mid-1950s onwards, union activism intensified, a change I explored in terms of Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus*.<sup>901</sup> By thinking about which social practices and cultural norms made strikes “common-sensical”, I was able to reconstruct the process by which workers built their collective capacity for sustained industrial conflict. One example of this sort of transformation was seen in attitudes towards piecework prices, where by using ordinary in-work socialising and regular discussion over the nature of the wage-effort bargain, activists were able to persuade co-workers that piecework timings were something which they had a right to bargain over. These discussions empowered workshop representatives – shop stewards – to take on more negotiating functions, and eventually, to lead members into collective action. Later, this activism would spread as workers looked to draw comparisons between the rights and rates achieved in different workshops and factories.

These changing social practices were accompanied by new attitudes with workers increasingly claiming new rights and developing new expectations. If the average car worker in 1950 was thankful to have a relatively well-paid job and often behaved as such, by 1960 they were more likely to find themselves demanding improvements. Pragmatic rationalities evolved to incorporate the idea that “external bargaining” conducted by trade union officials was not enough, and that decision-making and action within the factory were a necessary part of improving pay and conditions. These changes in motor industry shop-floor culture reflect the extent to which car workers were present in their own re-making. External forces – social, economic and political – all

---

901 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, pp. 55–56.

played a role in the re-shaping of workplace life in post-war Britain, but without the actions of car workers themselves these would not inevitably have led to the forms of industrial relations which later emerged.

Crucially, this post-war phase of shop-floor organising complicates many of the conventional narratives that structure the study of post-war Britain. Whilst the post-war period has generally been understood as a period in which occupational or class identities were eroded under the pressure of consumerism and affluence,<sup>902</sup> the experiences of car workers indicates that this was not universally the case. Long after 1945, workers were still generating and re-generating new solidarities and collectivities and did so as a means of shaping their own social relations in a post-war world that sometimes sought to dissolve such connections. That the origins of these workplace cultures were specifically post-war highlights the importance of treating these ideas, social practices and values as historical rather than simply as part of a continuous trade union tradition stretching back to the nineteenth century.<sup>903</sup> Finally, the process itself illustrates the extent to which shop-floor cultures and the beliefs contained within them were cultural and social as well as economic. Even the most pragmatic trade unionists built upon foundational values – solidarity, discipline, collectivism – prior to employing calculative reason.

### *Organisations and culture*

The importance of treating shop-floor cultures as historical was highlighted when I considered the nature of social organisation and cultural norms during

---

902 Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 216; Goldthorpe and others, *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour*, pp. 114–115; John Turner, 'Governors, Governance and Governed', p. 27; Harris, 'Tradition and Transformation', pp. 101, 110–111; Mandler, 'Two Cultures', pp. 134–146; Rubinstein, *The Labour Party and British Society*, p. 139; Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party : From Gaitskell to Blair* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 88–89.

903 Reid, *United We Stand*, pp. ix–xvii.

the 1960s and 1970s. Having emphasised in my introduction the extent to which workers exercised agency in the social processes which defined post-war monopoly capitalism, in Chapter Four I responded to the, often superficial, treatment of power in the workplace that has been characteristic of much post-war British history.<sup>904</sup> By attempting to disaggregate trade union power in a detailed examination of workplace organising, I looked to reveal the extent of workers' agency with factory trade unionism.

By the mid-1960s, a (much criticised<sup>905</sup>) new world of sectional bargaining had begun to emerge. Mass participation in decentralised workshop-based democratic structures helped many car workers secure substantial new rights, spreading considerable social power amongst groups of people often excluded from the formal authority structures of the post-war settlement. In most workplaces organisation centred around four central practices: steward representation, shop meetings, mandated delegates and autonomous action. Each helped ensure that power was accessible and dispersed. Steward representation, a form of peer democracy in which authority was vested in a fellow worker, made democracy immediate and accessible. Shop meetings, sometimes with consent from above, sometimes clandestine, were small enough to allow for full discussion and direct decision-making. Delegation, where representatives were sent to negotiate with specific instructions and reported back prior to taking decisions, ensured continuous control. Finally, autonomy, secured in part due to the protection of the larger factory-wide organisation and its prohibition on strike-breaking, enabled a degree of decentralisation which empowered small groups within these larger organisations.

At their most effective such practices delivered to workers a new sense of social power, exercised through a direct, participatory and decentralised

---

904 *Trade Unions in British Politics : The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), p. xi.

905 Reid, *United We Stand*, p. 286; Coates, 'The Vagaries of Participation', p. 186.

democracy. This power could offer a pluralism which extended even to marginal groups, such as women and immigrants. However, this was neither a limitless power nor one that operated without constraint. De-centralisation had its costs including financial hardship for strikers and laid-off co-workers, and strict workgroup discipline. Oversight was also important in a system defined essentially by its unevenness. Created workshop-by-workshop, generalised by a mixture of collective action and employer concession, de-centralised activism depended heavily on the character of particular workshops and their representation. It follows that sectional activism bore the marks of its creation and was structured by the histories and the experiences of participants. In many cases this unevenness mitigated against unified action on an industrial scale, and though possessed of sufficient social power to re-make their immediate surroundings, car workers could prove conservative when it came to wider matters, struggling to generate action both over less immediate industrial issues like retirement, holidays and wage structure, and also in systematically confronting issues like racism and sexual discrimination.

During the 1960s, employers and governments increasingly came to see de-centralised bargaining as detrimental to economic progress. Unofficial strikes, the workgroup's key sanction, were helping workers both to drive up pay and to resist attempts to raise output. In response employers looked to formalise industrial relations through "productivity bargaining". In what opponents referred to as an "employers offensive",<sup>906</sup> firms looked to restrict the uncontrolled power of stewards and workgroups to determine their immediate conditions by formalising bargaining. The way in which many car workers reacted to this shift again demonstrates the degree of agency that workers maintained in responding to economic change.

This thesis has looked at organisations at individual factories, examining how

---

906 Cliff, *The Employers Offensive*.

workers adapted their social practices to new circumstances. In most cases they attempted to respond to the new world of productivity bargaining by reinforcing factory-level institutions (although in ways structured by their factory histories, as well as new generations of workers). As in the earlier period, the uneven ways in which workers came together to affected how they thought and acted. At Halewood, for instance, workers forged a strong and forthright joint shop stewards committee, which led them into mass strikes against company reforms in an attempt to defend a space for autonomous organising. At Cowley Assembly, Longbridge, Stoke Aldermoor and Solihull various changes to social practices, adopted in order to bring about similar effects, involved trade-offs between different priorities, forcing workers to choose between democracy and leadership, autonomy and unity, discipline and freedom. The resulting organisations profoundly affected the shape of workers' social power.

### *The cultural values of workplace activism*

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, worker activists navigated a course through complex events, reacting to economic and political change, building different kinds of collective connections, encouraging some forms of democratic action and discouraging others. At the heart of my argument is the idea that, despite the top-down nature of the post-war settlement, workers still carved out considerable social power through their activism and the operation and the use of that power shaped how they both thought and acted. Having spent much of the 1950s organising their industry workshop-by-workshop, the activism that became characteristic of car workers during the 1960s reflects the nature of that creative process. Along with de-centralised bargaining and workgroup democracy, many workers came to share a common set of values in which group autonomy, direct democracy, consultation and fairness defined their expectations. These values were present in both their collective action – often short unofficial strikes – and in the demands they made – for consultation in

change, for recognition of skill, for rewards for productivity, and for fairness between groups. Crucially, although Rubinstein thought many of these behaviours translated into wage demands, I have argued – contrary to the economic determinism I have found in much of the existing historiography – that such ideas contained considerable cultural content and cannot be reduced to one universal economic rationality.

As the late 1960s ushered in economic and political reforms, car workers did not respond automatically to new circumstances in line with any obvious collective interest, but in ways that were structured both by their history and by the interventions of groups and individuals. As firms introduced productivity bargaining to both eliminate everyday conflict and drive up output, their success was mixed, if not entirely absent. Resistance, often based on the same conceptions of autonomy, democracy and consultation that had animated previous unofficial strikes, re-shaped schemes designed to operate in a disciplinary fashion. The fundamental premise that management should determine production speed and labour load was undermined as car workers laid claim to their now habitual levels of job control.

The form productivity bargaining in the motor industry eventually took was profoundly influenced by the struggle over its implementation, with car workers eventually winning new rights to “mutuality” in the work process. Consequently the complex moral world of shop-floor bargaining shifted to emphasise rights to consultation, to safe, clean working conditions and to negotiated change. Autonomy and democracy were sustained as values, whilst productivity – the most important category for the schemes' authors – became for many workers a purely managerial concern and a subject for adversarial bargaining. As a result, the first half of the 1970s now saw a perpetuation of the small-scale conflict that had marked de-centralised bargaining conducted over production rather than money.



As workers changed their social practices in response to productivity bargaining mass conflict became more common. Just as decentralised bargaining had earlier reflected the nature of organisations and their social practices, the development of new factory organisations in the 1970s enabled new forms of activism. As JSSCs became more dynamic they were able to involve entire factories in sectional issues, contributing to a politicisation of the everyday. When defined by a bigger constituency, minor issues often came to be understood as symbolic of wider principles, setting crucial precedents for the future. Simultaneously, as organisations developed greater social power the scope of issues in which they could intervene became wider and more strategic, now incorporating pay policies, industrial relations regimes, discipline, and even government legislation, and contributing to an ever wider definition of what constituted the “industrial”.

The “industrial” remained a central concept in workplace activism throughout, marking the boundary of what pertained to workers and what did not. As the power of workers’ organisations expanded the realm where they could and should meaningfully influence events changed, generating new behaviours including “political” strikes against government policy and factory occupations against closures and redundancies. These events had uneven effects on the attitudes of individual car workers. Some on the left were politicised by a growing sense of social power. As the spheres in which their activism could effect change expanded, so did their horizons. At the other end of the scale the growing politicisation of everyday life and the expanding scope of workplace trade unionism were not so welcome. Alienated by constant conflict, moderate activists looked to counteract these processes, to restore more conventional boundaries between the industrial and political, and to reduce the conflict - which they saw as damaging to their economic situation, both personal and collective. Both tendencies reflected and echoed ideas which could be found

within the wider workforce, sometimes within the same worker. The experiences of car workers during “the high tide” reflected a number of features unique to their class position. The historical development of their organisations had seen the emergence of social practices which forged the factory workforce into a group capable of reaching and acting on a collective consensus. These practices and the cultural norms that accompanied them in turn helped sustain shared moral values and attitudes. Finally, participant workers acting within these cultures, militants, moderates and ordinary members, carved out their own roles as activists; debating and acting together in ways that shaped their collective behaviours.

### *The future of militancy*

Between 1945 and 1977 the actions of car workers within the workplace point towards the importance of challenging the conventional narratives of the period, and the rather limited subjectivity they attribute to working-class people. The changing behaviour and attitudes of the men and women who worked in the motor industry and participated in labour militancy provide us with important insights into life in post-war Britain. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that concepts like “economism”, “industrial issues”, politics, managerial prerogatives and productivity were contested ground with meanings that continuously changed throughout the period.

One change that I have not had space within this thesis to address has been the seemingly sudden decline of this world of militant workplace cultures. In 1977, the Labour government hired South African businessman Michael Edwardes with an explicit remit to rationalise British Leyland. This decision resulted in multiple closures and eventually declining strike levels during the

1980s.<sup>907</sup> Whilst many labour historians have attempted to explain this decline with reference to changing state policies and economic circumstances,<sup>908</sup> the reasons why workers gradually stopped investing so much energy in shop-floor institutions are certainly as complex as the motivations behind earlier workplace conflict. The changing patterns of post-1977 militancy, which saw both novel forms of activism, and declining faith in the shop steward system more generally, merit far more detailed study than is possible within the confines of this project.

The nature of changing workplace cultures between 1945 and 1977 has seldom been subjected to sufficiently detailed attention, with changing attitudes towards labour activism often being subsumed within a narrative where “privatism” generated by affluence steadily eroded long-standing occupational solidarities.<sup>909</sup> With this thesis I have uncovered ample evidence that the changing nature of workplace politics is more complex than this narrative allows. The connection between post-war Keynesianism and mass trade unionism was less automatic than is often implied, and new solidarities often had to be made prior to the emergence of the labour militancy and social practices that so marked mid-twentieth-century Britain. The cultures that emerged were also far more interesting than ideas of economic pragmatism and mainstream progressive liberalism can fully encapsulate. The shop-floor culture of the British motor industry, which generated its own moral values, cultural norms and pragmatic rationalities, was specific to those workplaces, and when we disaggregate car workers' and ideas we expose a collective culture that was capable of accommodating a wide range of orientations, from

---

907 Whisler, *The British Motor Industry*, pp. 369–375. Interestingly, Paul Stewart has argued that this process of decline is not nearly as complete as often imagined, see: Paul Stewart, *We Sell Our Time No More : Workers' Struggles against Lean Production in the British Car Industry* (London: Pluto, 2009), pp. 33–34.

908 Jefferys, 'The Changing Face of Conflict', p. 81; Howell, *Trade Unions and the State*, pp. 131–134.

909 Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, p. 216.

the conservative to the revolutionary, all within the same overarching group of mutually-reinforcing ideas. This culture often differed substantially from the values of wider British society and at times came to challenge and even endanger those values.

Crucial to all these changing subjectivities was the agency of the workers who participated in workplace trade unionism. Many of them, rather than accepting the limited role envisaged for them in the post-war settlement, set about challenging their place in society, re-designing their roles and over-filling their allocated subject positions. In so doing they claimed new rights, changed social relations at work, transformed who they were and how they were perceived. Their capacity to do so challenges us to look into whether other groups in post-war Britain did likewise, not just as organised workers but also as consumers, citizens, tenants, home-owners and community members. The ability of car workers to reshape the workplace as a *habitus*, to change what they could and couldn't do; to change their expectations, their responsibilities, their modes of thought and discussion and the world around them invites us to look for other prompts from below which helped transform life in "consensus" Britain.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Manuscript and archival sources:**

#### **Bedfordshire and Luton Archives, Bedford**

##### *Len Holden Collection [LHA]:*

X819/11/1, Peter Vigor Interview, 1 April 1981

X819/11/2, Harold Horne Interview, July 1978

X819/11/4, Glyn Morgan Interview, 4 December 1979

X819/11/9, Jack West Interview, January 1981

X819/11/11, Jock Smith Interview, 17 March 1981

X819/11/12 Jock Adare Interview, 1 April 1981

#### **British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent**

##### *British Cartoon Archive [BCA]:*

Jak (Raymond Jackson), *Evening Standard* ((c) Associated Newspapers Ltd. / Solo Syndication), 4 February 1977

Jak (Raymond Jackson), *Evening Standard* ((c) Associated Newspapers Ltd. / Solo Syndication), 4 June 1969

Michael Cummings, *Evening Standard* ((c) Express Syndication Ltd.), 7 August 1970

Michael Cummings, *Evening Standard* ((c) Express Syndication Ltd.), 27 February 1970

Stanley Franklin, *The Sun* ((c) News UK), 22 May 1976

Keith Waite, *Daily Mirror* ((c) Keith Waite), 28 March 1976

Coventry History Centre:

*Oral History Collection:*

PA1662/2/169, Eddie Parry Interview, 1987.

London Metropolitan Archives

*Papers of the National Union of Vehicle Builders London District:*

ACC 3289/10, NUVB London District Committee Meeting Minutes, 1962

National Archives, Kew

*Papers of the Ministry of Labour and Successors [NA]:*

LAB 17/369, Schedules of Stoppages, January 1965 - July 1966

Modern Records Centre, Coventry

*Alan Thornett Collection [ATC]:*

MSS.391/1/7/1-7, TGWU Branch 5/55 Meeting Minutes, April 1967 to June 1974

MSS.391/3/30-34, Cowley Plant – Shop Stewards' Circulars, Correspondence, December 1963 to 1974

MSS.391/5/T/1, 'Branch News', Newsletter of Transport and General Workers' Union Branch 5/55, Cowley Plant, September 1969 to May 1974

MSS.391/5/T/2, Leaflets of the Organisation to Represent Moderate Opinion on Trade Union Matters, June 1973 to February 1974

*British Leyland Trade Union Committee Papers [BLTUC]:*

MSS.228/2-3, Minutes and Correspondence of British Motor Corporation Joint Shop Stewards Committee, 1958-78

MSS.228/15, Morris Motors Joint Shop Stewards Committee Minutes, 1960-69

*Chrysler UK Shop Stewards Papers [CUK]:*

MSS.315/A/1/1/1-4, Rootes-Chrysler Stoke Aldermoor JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1960-1977

MSS.315/A/3/2, Correspondence of Rootes-Chrysler Joint Shop Stewards, 1976-82

MSS.315/C/10/1, Mounted Press-cuttings related to the motor industry, January to November 1973

*Colin Barker Papers [CB]:*

MSS.152/1/5/12, International Socialists Rank and File Material, "Motor", 1968-70

*Paul Worm Automotive Industrial Relations Collection [PWAIR]:*

MSS.356/1/1/1, Rover Combine Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1952-1960

MSS.356/1/7/1, TGWU Branch 5/357 Meeting Minutes, July 1960 to May 1979

MSS.356/1/8/1-6, Rover Solihull TGWU Production Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, May 1972 to 1977

MSS.356/1/10/1-2, Rover Tyseley Joint Shop Stewards Committee Meeting Minutes, 1949-1954

MSS.356/7/1/2, Ron Clarke Interview, 10 December 1982

MSS.356/7/2/1, J. Harris Interview, Undated

MSS.356/7/2/4, Peter Nicholas Interview, 4 August 1982

MSS.356/7/2/10, Martin Kavanagh Interview, 21 February 1982

MSS.356/7/2/11, Joe Taylor and Sam Wright Interview, November 1982

MSS.356/7/2/12, John Bliss Interview, 30 October 1982

MSS.356/7/2/14, Amy Wren Interview, 2 November 1982.

MSS.356/7/2/15, Bob Ashworth Interview, 12 February 1979'

MSS.356/7/2/16, Bill Lock Interview, Undated

MSS.356/7/2/17, Ann Holmes Interview, 10 November 1982

MSS.356/7/2/19, Eddie Shaw Interview, 9,12 November 1982

MSS.356/7/2/20, Ted Evans Interview, 12 November 1982

MSS.356/7/2/23, Clem West Interview, 18 November 1982

MSS.356/7/2/26, Jack Rosbrook Interview, 24 November 1982'

MSS.356/7/2/32, Colin Fitzer Interview, December 1982'

MSS.356/7/2/32, Stan Hill Interview, 5 July 1983'

MSS.356/7/2/34, Eddie Squires Interview, February 1983

MSS.356/7/2/38, Bill Lock Interview, 8 February 1983

MSS.356/7/2/46, Steve Gallant Interview, 25 July 1983

MSS.356/7/3/5, Joe Harris Interview, 15 February 1979

MSS.356/7/3/10, Interview with a Group of Workers on the "Wet Deck" Section of the Rover Solihull Paint Shop, 1979

MSS.356/7/3/23, Livingstone Webb Interview, 19 November 1982

MSS.356/7/3/29, Brian Bird Interview, 1 December 1982

MSS.356/7/3/39, Joe Harris Interview, 3 February 1983

*Richard Albert Etheridge Collection [RAE]:*

MSS.202/S/J/1/6, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1959

MSS.202/S/J/1/7, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1960-1961

MSS.202/S/J/1/9, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1961-63



MSS.202/S/J/1/11, Austin Longbridge JSSC Meeting Minutes, 1963-65

MSS.202/S/J/3/2/4-193, Agendas and Papers for Austin Longbridge JSSC and Works Committee, 1953-1973

MSS.202/S/J/4/1, Austin Longbridge Joint Shop Stewards Handbills and Leaflets, 1946-1972

MSS.202/S/J/4/2, Austin Longbridge Joint Shop Stewards Ephemera, 1946-1974

MSS.202/S/J/8/3-78, Dick Etheridge Daily Working Notes, 1946 to 1973

### **Printed primary sources**

#### Coventry Evening Telegraph

Andrews, Graham, 'Chrysler Wives Clash at Stoke', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 14 May 1975, p. 1

#### Daily Express and Sunday Express

'Union Backs the Mole... as Wives Get Factory Going', *Daily Express*, 25 April 1974, p. 1

Pratt, Colin, 'Stop the Mole and His Mates', *Daily Express*, 7 January 1976, p. 2'

———'Wives Strike Back', *Daily Express*, 23 April 1974, p. 1

Evans, Trevor, and Guy Eden, 'Reds Behind Strikes', *Daily Express*, 29 June 1948, p. 1

Renshaw, Keith, 'Strikes Cost Me £10 a Week, Says Car Man', *Sunday Express*, 27 April 1974, p. 1

#### Daily Mail

Bowd, Graeme, 'The Cowley Wives Are Heading for Victory at Last', *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1974, p. 1

Chalmers, Aubrey, and David Pryke, 'Strikers back to Work Vote at Cowley', *Daily Mail*, 25 April 1974, p. 1

### Engineering Voice

'AEU Elections', *Engineering Voice*, Spring 1966, pp. 2–3.

'Our Classless Society', *Engineering Voice*, Christmas 1966, pp. 4–6;

'Woodcock's Wages Blunder', *Engineering Voice*, Summer 1965, p. 2;

'Workers Control', *Engineering Voice*, June 1973, pp. 1–2;

Bull, R, 'Letter to the Editor', *Engineering Voice*, May 1966, p. 3

Owen, Frank, 'Democracy and Social Ownership', *Engineering Voice*, Summer 1965, p. 6

### The Daily Mirror

'What I Am Fighting for - Carol Miller', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1974, p. 3

Hall, Margaret, 'Revolt of the Fed-Up Wives', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1974, p. 1

Hughes, Paul, 'Noose Man Reveals His 6m Dossier', *Daily Mirror*, 15 March 1966, p. 1

Jackson, Len, "'Handbell Mac" Deserved the Sack', *The Daily Mirror*, 17 April 1957, p. 5

Laxton, Edward and Margaret Hall, 'Carol's Glory Girls', *The Daily Mirror*, 24 April 1974, p. 6

### The Guardian and The Observer

'An Unhappy Centenary for the TUC', *The Guardian*, 9 February 1968, p. 6

'A Battle with No Winners', *The Guardian*, 28 June 1972, p. 12

'Consent or Compulsion for the Unions?', *The Guardian*, 14 March 1966, p. 8.

‘Hands down for Democracy’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 1978, p. 14

‘Dock Labour’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1951, p. 4.

‘Lord Ryder’s Bottomless Pits and All That’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 1975, p. 12.

‘The Fear of Strikes’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 1961, p. 8

‘The Manchester Dock Strike’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 5 October 1951, p. 6

Elvin, Rene, ‘Grim Lessons of Weimar’, *The Guardian*, 20 November 1973, p. 21

Whiteley, Geoffrey, ‘£16m Cowley Strike Fades as Shop Stewards Relents’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 1974, p. 6

———, ‘Militants’ Strike Call a Failure’, *The Guardian*, 13 January 1971, p. 1

Yates, Ivan, ‘Keeping the Peace - 2: At Home: Ivan Yates Reflects on Political Violence’, *The Observer*, 20 August 1972, p. 6

### The Sun

Kay, John, and Brian Dixon, ‘Ban Sex for Strikers’, *The Sun*, 23 April 1974, p. 1

### Solidarity: For Workers' Power

‘Inside Vauxhall’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, June 1969, 21–22

‘I Work at Fords’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, May 1963, 3–8

‘News from Ford’s’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, May 1962, 3–4

‘Vauxhall Follow-Up’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, August 1970

‘Working for Ford - Seen from Vauxhall’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, April 1974, 16

Ashcroft, Peter, ‘More about Vauxhall’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, July 1967

Jeffreys, Brian, 'Too Old at 50', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, July 1966, 20–22

Spartacus, 'The Vauxhall Struggle', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, September 1967, 3–6

Weller, Ken, 'Vauxhall: Militants Beware', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, May 1969, 17–20

### The Times

'24-Hour Strike by Rover Inspectors', *The Times*, 25 June 1959, p. 6

'200 Car Workers Walk Out At Coventry', *The Times*, 20 October 1960, p. 5

'A Blow To The Nation', *The Times*, 30 August 1947, p. 5

'A Communist Offensive', *The Times*, 25 September 1948, p. 5

'A Dangerous Strike', *The Times*, 15 December 1949, p. 5

'An Unjustifiable Strike', *The Times*, 1 January 1949, p. 5

'A Wanton Stoppage', *The Times*, 9 July 1949, p. 5

'Blockade Threat at Linwood', *The Times*, 20 November 1975, p. 21

'Dilemma of the Unofficial Strike', *The Times*, 1 March 1968, p. 23

'"Fined" Workers Get Their Money Back', *The Times*, 15 March 1966, p. 10

'Keeping Up the Levels', *The Times*, 5 December 1960, p. 13

'More Join "Dirty Jobs" Strike', *The Times*, 27 October 1970, p. 2

'Mr Heath's Home Work', *The Times*, 4 June 1968, p. 9

'Out To Win A Bad Name', *The Times*, 6 April 1971, p. 17

'Showdown', *The Times*, 20 January 1966, p. 13

'Steel's Legacy of Labour Problems', *The Times*, 28 September 1966, p. 23

'Strike by 1.5 Million Closes Shipyards, Car Plants: Rolls-Royce Men Work on',  
*The Times*, 2 March 1971, p. 1

'Strike Spreads at Rovers', *The Times*, 3 August 1961, p. 12

'The Argument of Numbers', *The Times*, 25 June 1977, p. 15.

'They Cannot Do Their Job', *The Times*, 2 September 1978, p. 13

'The Coventry Strike', *The Times*, 13 March 1946, p. 5

'The Disruptors', *The Times*, 27 January 1960, p. 1

'The Future Of British Leyland', *The Times* (London, England, 25 April 1975), p. 17

'The Gas Strike', *The Times*, 14 August 1946, p. 5

'The Right to Dismiss', *The Times*, 11 April 1963, p. 13

'The Short Way To Discredit Unions', *The Times*, 18 October 1977, p. 17

'The Strikemakers', *The Times*, 16 September 1950, p. 5

'The Trade Unions' Choice', *The Times*, 7 January 1946, p. 5

'Trouble At The Docks', *The Times*, 11 April 1947, p. 5

'We Cannot Afford the Cost of Surrender', *The Times*, 27 November 1973, p. 19

'What Vauxhall's Vote Means', *The Times*, 25 October 1978, p. 19

'White-Collar Unions', *The Times*, 31 August 1961, p. 9

'Workers Lock out Management and Staff at Ford's Swansea Plant', *The Times*, 24 April 1975, p. 20

'Workers Should Be on Firms' Boards, Says Mr. Grimond', *The Times*, 25 September 1961, p. 8

Abbott, Stephen, 'Letter: Time Lost in Industry', *The Times*, 14 November 1967, p. 11

Barratt, W.S., 'Letter: Industrial Unrest', *The Times*, 1 September 1960, p. 11

Bell, Geoffrey F., 'Letter: Miners' claim: Urgent need for conciliation machinery', *The Times*, 31 January 1974, p. 17

Boyd-Carpenter MP, John, 'Letter: Haulage Workers' Strike', *The Times*, 10 January 1947, p. 5

Brooks, Edwin 'Letter: Lost Working Days', *The Times*, 3 January 1968, p. 9.

- Carr MP, Robert, 'Letter: Law Handicaps Role Of Industry', *The Times*, 30 December 1967, p. 7
- Coates, Ken, and Anthony Topham, 'Letter: Seamen's striker', *The Times*, 21 June 1966, p. 23
- Dwyer, Dennis, '350,000 Followed Strike Call', *The Times*, 9 December 1970, p. 21
- Godwin, B. Anne, 'Letter: Typists' "Walk-Out"', *The Times*, 24 August 1960, p. 9
- H.T. Smith, Arthur W. Cuff, Mary A.K. Gornall, Robert Morley, Laurence Carter, Eustace H. Allan, and others, 'Letters: Should Interruptions in Vital Services Be Forbidden by Law?', *The Times*, 11 December 1970, p. 13
- Hamilton, Alan 'All Main Car Plants Shut for Day', *The Times*, 19 March 1971, p. 1
- Irvine, A.J. 'Letter: Competition In Transport', *The Times*, 10 February 1960, p. 11
- Levin, Bernard, 'The Old Firm's Soap Coupons Come a-Wheeling in', *The Times*, 11 April 1978, p. 16
- Magness, Lester, 'Letter: The Miners' Case', *The Times*, 16 February 1960, p. 11
- McCreery, Nigel, 'Letter: The Seamen's Strike', *The Times*, 14 June 1966, p. 13
- Perman, Raymond, 'Workers at Cowley Reject Trotskyist Mr Thornett', *The Times*, 6 June 1974, p. 5
- R.P. Nelson, 'Letter: "Tax-Loss" Strikes', *The Times* (London, England, 6 February 1960), p. 7
- Sampson, R. and D.M. Hardern, Noreen V. Southby, John Lambert, 'Letters: Rights and Duties of Hospital Workers', *The Times*, 10 March 1973, p. 15
- Shakespeare, R.W. 'Bitterness Grows in Car Disputes: Short Time at Cowley', *The Times*, 24 October 1969, p. 21
- , 'Chrysler Workers' Threat of Militant Action Growing', *The Times*, 23 December 1975, p. 1
- , 'Crucial Strike Talks Today at Vauxhall', *The Times*, 31 March 1970, p. 17

- , 'New Labour Troubles for Motor Industry', *The Times*, 5 January 1971, p. 5
- , 'Thornycroft Sit-in Ends', *The Times*, 28 October 1972, p. 19
- , 'Vauxhall Hopes of Restart Today', *The Times*, 10 March 1969, p. 17
- Taylor MP, Charles, 'Letter: The Closed Shop', *The Times*, 22 November 1946, p. 5
- Tennant, P.F.D. and Richard Hugh, R.A. Flamank, John D. Solomon, Margaret Wild, Michael Walker, and others, 'Letters: Effects of Electricians' Work to Rule', *The Times*, 12 December 1970, p. 11
- Webb, Clifford 'BMH Tightens Management Control at Longbridge', *The Times*, 23 February 1968, p. 20
- , 'Triumph Stewards Refuse New Pact to End Piecework', *The Times*, 13 May 1972, p. 19
- , 'Triumph Workers to Hold Mass Meeting on Company Pay Plan', *The Times*, 13 October 1971, p. 20
- Wedderburn, K.W. 'The Seamen's Dispute', *The Times*, 23 August 1960, p. 9

#### Government Reports and Hansard

- Cameron, Lord, Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute at Briggs Motor Bodies Limited (London: HMSO, 1957)
- D.T. Jack, Industrial Courts Act, 1919, *Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute between the Ford Motor Company, Limited, Dagenham and Members of the Trade Unions Represented on the Trade Union Side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee*, 1962
- Hansard HC Deb 02 April 1946 Vol 421 cc1112-217
- Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, *Report* (London: HMSO, 1968)
- Ryder, Don and Department of Industry, *British Leyland, the next Decade : An Abridged Version of a Report Presented to the Secretary of State for Industry* (London: H.M.S.O., 1975)

'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1970', *Department of Employment Gazette*, May 1971

'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1971', *Department of Employment Gazette*, May 1972

'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1972', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1973

'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1973', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1974

'Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes in 1974', *Department of Employment Gazette*, June 1975

## Electronic resources

Big Flame, 'An Open Letter by a Group of Halewood Ford Workers to Their Brothers and Sisters', *Big Flame 1970-84*, 1972  
<<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/open-letter-leaflet.pdf>>  
[accessed 17 April 2015]

———, 'Ford Bulletin No 2 Halewood', *Big Flame 1970-84*, 1974  
<<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/halewood-bulletin-2.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2015]

Callaghan, James, "Leader's Speech, Labour Party Conference, Blackpool", *British Political Speech Archive*, 1976  
<<http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=174>>  
[accessed 15 July 2015]

'Nothing Less than a State Funeral Will Do', *Mail Online*  
<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2306102/Margaret-Thatcher-dead-Nothing-state-funeral-do.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015]

'Made in Dagenham', *Woman's Hour* (BBC Radio 4, 2010)

R.A. Hart, Evaluation of United Kingdom Engineering Strikes, 1920-1970  
[computer File]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], June 2008. SN: 5841, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5841-1>



'Women Strike for Equal Pay, 1968 (audio)', *Learning Zone Broadband Class Clips*, 2010 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/women-strike-for-equal-pay-1968-audio/11139.html>> [accessed 10 May 2013]

### **Printed secondary works**

Addison, Paul, *No Turning Back : The Peaceful Revolutions of Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Adeney, Martin, *The Motor Makers : The Turbulent History of Britain's Car Industry* (London: Collins, 1988)

Batstone, Eric, Ian Boraston, and Stephen Frenkel, *Shop Stewards in Action : The Organization of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977)

Beckett, Andy, *When the Lights Went out : Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber, 2009)

Beynon, Huw, *Working for Ford* (London: Allen Lane, 1973)

Black, Lawrence, *Redefining British Politics : Culture, Consumerism, and Participation, 1954-70* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Black, Lawrence and Hugh Pemberton, 'Introduction : The Uses (and Abuses) of Affluence', in *An Affluent Society? : Britain's Post-War 'Golden Age' Revisited*, ed. by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004)

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010)

———, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992)

Bowden, Sue, James Foreman-Peck, and Tom Richardson, 'The Post-War Productivity Failure : Insights from Oxford (Cowley)', *Business History*, 43 (2001), 54–78

Brooke, Stephen, 'Revisiting Southam Street : Class, Generation, Gender, and Race in the Photography of Roger Mayne', *Journal of British Studies*, 53/2 (2014), 453-496

Buckle, David, *Turbulent Times in the Car Industry : Memories of a Trade Union Official at Cowley, Oxford* (Radley: David Buckle, 2011)

- Burawoy, Michael, *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1990)
- Burkett, Jodi, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain: Britishness, 'Race' and the Radical Left in the 1960s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013)
- Campbell, Alan, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy, eds., *The Post-War Compromise : British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1, 1945-64* (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007)
- Cavendish, Ruth, *Women on the Line* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982)
- Childs, David, *Britain since 1939 : Progress and Decline* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002)
- Church, Roy, *The Rise and Decline of the British Motor Industry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)
- Claydon, Tim, 'Tales of Disorder : The Press and the Narrative Construction of Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry, 1950-79', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 9 (2000), 1–36
- , 'Trade Unions, Employers and Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry c.1919-1945', *Business History*, 29 (1987), 304–24
- Clegg, H.A., *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970)
- Cliff, Tony, *Chrysler Workers : The Fight for a Future* (London: Socialist Worker, 1979)
- , *The Employers' Offensive : Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them* (London: Pluto Press, 1970)
- Coates, Ken, 'The Vagaries of Participation, 1945-1960', in *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 156–72
- Cohen, Sheila, 'Equal Pay - or What? Economics, Politics and the 1968 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike', *Labor History*, 53, 51–68
- , *Notoriously Militant : The Story of a Union Branch* (London: Merlin Press, 2013)
- Copsey, Richard, and N.W.C. Woodward, 'The British Economy in the 1970s : An Overview', in *Britain in the 1970s : The Troubled Decade*, ed. by Richard Coopey and N.W.C. Woodward (London: UCL Press, 1996)

- Cronin, James, *Labour and Society in Britain 1918-1979* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1984)
- Curtis, Ben, *The South Wales Miners; 1964-1985* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013)
- Darlington, Ralph, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism : Shop Stewards' Organization in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell, 1994)
- Darlington, Ralph, and Dave Lyddon, *Glorious Summer : Class Struggle in Britain, 1972* (London: Bookmarks, 2001)
- Darlington, Ralph, and Martin Upchurch, 'A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File versus Bureaucracy Debate', *Capital & Class*, 36 (2012), 77–95
- Davis, Mary, *Comrade or Brother? : A History of the British Labour Movement* (London: Pluto Press, 2009)
- Donnelly, Tom, Janet Tully, and David Morris, 'The Decline of the Coventry Car Industry 1945-68', *Midland History*, 26 (2001), 198–211
- Dorey, Peter, 'Individual Liberty Versus Industrial Order: Conservatives and the Trade Union Closed Shop 1946–90', *Contemporary British History*, 23 (2009), 221–44
- Downs, Laura Lee, 'Industrial Decline, Rationalization and Equal Pay : The Bedaux Strike at Rover Automobile Company', *Social History*, 15 (1990), 45–73
- Dunnett, Peter, *The Decline of the British Motor Industry : The Effects of Government Policy, 1945-1979* (London: Croom Helm)
- Durcan, J. W., W. E. J McCarthy, and G. P Redman, *Strikes in Post-War Britain : A Study of Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes, 1946-1973* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983)
- Evans, E. W., and S. W. Creigh, 'Work Stoppages - the British Experience: Strikes', in *Industrial Conflict in Britain*, ed. by E.W. Evans and S.W. Creigh (London: Cass, 1977), pp. 1–20
- Ewart, Henrietta, "'Coventry Irish" : Community, Class, Culture and Narrative in the Formation of a Migrant Identity, 1940-1970', *Midland History*, 36 (2011), 225–44
- Exell, Arthur, 'Morris Motors in the 1940s', *History Workshop*, 9 (1980), 90–115
- Ferris, Paul, *The New Militants : Crisis in the Trade Unions* (Harmondsworth:

Penguin, 1972)

Fetzer, Thomas, 'International Challenges and National Allegiances : British and West German Trade Union Politics at Ford, 1967-1973', *Contemporary European History*, 18 (2009), 99–122

Foreman-Peck, James, Sue Bowden, and Alan McKinley, *The British Motor Industry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)

Foster, John, and Charles Woolfson, 'How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle : The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Work-In, 1971-72', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (London: Ashgate, 1999)

Friedman, Andrew L., *Industry and Labour : Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (London: Macmillan, 1977)

Friedman, Henry, and Sander Meredeen, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict : Lessons from Ford* (London: Croom Helm, 1980)

Frow, Ruth, and Edmund Frow, *Engineering Struggles : Episodes in the Story of the Shop Stewards' Movement* (Manchester: Working Class Movement Library, 1982)

Godelier, Maurice, *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1972)

Goldthorpe, John , 'The Current Inflation: Towards a Sociological Account', in *The Political Economy of Inflation*, ed. by Fred Hirsch and John Goldthorpe (London: Martin Robertson, 1978), pp. 186–213

Goldthorpe, John, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer, and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker : Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968)

———, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969)

Goodrich, Carter, *The Frontier of Control : A Study in British Workshop Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1975)

Gospel, Howard F., 'The Management of Labour', in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979 : Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 84–106

- Halpin, Kevin, *Memoirs of a Militant: Sharply and to the Point* (Glasgow: Praxis Press, 2012)
- Harris, Jose, 'Tradition and Transformation : Society and Civil Society in Britain, 1945-2001', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 91–125
- Harrison, Brian, *Finding a Role?: The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- , *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Harrison, Martin, *TV News, Whose Bias? : A Casebook Analysis of Strikes, Television and Media Studies* (Hermitage: Policy Journals, 1985)
- Harvey, David, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006)
- Hay, Colin, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30 (1996), 253–77
- Henderson, Frank, *Life on the Track : Memoirs of a Socialist Worker* (London: Bookmarks, 2009)
- Hickson, Kevin, *The IMF Crisis of 1976 and British Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005)
- Hill, Stephen, *The Dockers : Class and Tradition in London* (London: Heinemann, 1976)
- Hinton, James, *Shop Floor Citizens : Engineering Democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1994)
- Hoggart, Richard, *The Uses of Literacy : Aspects of Working Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Penguin, 1992)
- Holden, Len, "'Think of Me Simply as the Skipper": Industrial Relations at Vauxhalls 1920-1950', *Oral History*, 9 (1981), 18–32
- Howarth, Janet, 'Classes and Cultures in England after 1951 : The Case of Working-Class Women', in *Classes, Cultures and Politics : Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. by Clare V.J. Griffiths, William Whyte, and James J. Nott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 85–101

- Howell, Chris, *Trade Unions and the State : The Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain, 1890-2000* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2005)
- Hughes, Celia, 'Young Socialist Men in 1960s Britain : Subjectivity and Sociability', *History Workshop Journal*, 73 (2012), 170–92
- Hyman, Richard, *Strikes* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989)
- Jackson, Ben, 'An Ideology of Class: Neo-Liberalism and the Trade Unions, c.1930-79', in *Classes, Cultures and Politics : Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. by Clare V.J. Griffiths, William Whyte, and James J. Nott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 263–81
- , *Equality and the British Left : A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007)
- Jefferys, Stephen, 'The Changing Face of Conflict: Shopfloor Organization at Longbridge, 1939-1980', in *Shopfloor Politics and Job Controls : The Post-War Engineering Industry*, ed. by Michael Terry and Paul Edwards (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 54–82
- Johns, Stephen, and Alan Thornett, *Victimization at Cowley* (London, 1974)
- Jones, Ben, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England : Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012)
- Jones, Jack, *Union Man : The Autobiography of Jack Jones* (London: Collins, 1986)
- Jones, Tudor, *Remaking the Labour Party : From Gaitskell to Blair* (London: Routledge, 1996)
- Kavanagh, Dennis, and Peter Morris, *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Thatcher* (Worcester: Basil Blackwell, 1989)
- Kuttner, Robert, *Everything for Sale : The Virtues and Limits of Markets* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999)
- Lane, Tony, *The Union Makes Us Strong : The British Working Class, Its Trade Unionism and Politics* (London: Arrow Books, 1974)
- Lanning, Greg, Christine. Peaker, Caro. Webb, and Richard. White, *Making Cars : A History of Car Making in Cowley by the People Who Make the Cars* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985)

- Lawrence, Jon, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, C. 1930–64', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 273–99
- , 'Social Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77/1 (2014), 215–239
- Laybourn, Keith, *A History of British Trade Unionism, 1800–1990* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1992)
- Lent, Adam, *British Social Movements since 1945 : Sex, Colour, Peace and Power* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
- Lerner, Shirley, and John Bescoby, 'Shop Steward Combine Committees in the British Engineering Industry', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 4 (1966), 154–64
- Lyddon, Dave, "'Glorious Summer", 1972: The High Tide of Rank and File Militancy', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism: Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964–79*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 326–52
- , 'The Car Industry, 1945–79 : Shop Stewards and Workplace Unionism', in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939–1979 : Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 186–211
- , "'Trade Union Traditions", the Oxford Welsh, and the 1934 Pressed Steel Strike', *Llafur*, 6 (1993), 106–14
- , 'Workplace Organization in the British Car Industry : A Critique of Jonathan Zeitlin', *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 131–40
- Maguire, Patrick, 'Labour and the Law: The Politics of British Industrial Relations, 1945–79', in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939–1979 : Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 44–61
- Mandler, Peter, 'Two Cultures - One or Many?', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Burk, Kathleen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 127–55
- Mann, Michael, *The Sources of Social Power : Vol.1 A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D.1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

- Marsden, David, Timothy Morris, Paul Willman, and Stephen Wood, *The Car Industry : Labour Relations and Industrial Adjustment* (London: Tavistock, 1985)
- Martin Lopez, Tara, *The Winter of Discontent : Myth, Memory, and History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014)
- Maurice, Marc, and François Sellier, Jean-Jacques Silvestre, *The Social Foundations of Industrial power: A Comparison of France and Germany* (London: MIT Press, 1986)
- Marwick, Arthur, *British Society since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2003)
- Marx, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.1* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)
- Mathews, John, *Ford Strike : The Workers' Story* (London: Panther Books, 1972)
- McIlroy, John, “Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned”: The Trotskyists and the Trade Unions’, in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 259–96
- , ‘Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics’, in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 216–58
- McIlroy, John, and Alan Campbell, ‘The High Tide of Trade Unionism : Mapping Industrial Politics, 1964-79’, in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 93–130
- McIvor, Arthur, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001)
- , *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- McKibbin, Ross, *Classes and Cultures : England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)



- McKinlay, Alan, and Joseph Melling, 'The Shop Floor Politics of Productivity: Work, Power and Authority Relations in British Engineering, C. 1945-57', in *The Post-War Compromise : British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1, 1945-64*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 222–41
- Melman, Seymour, *Decision-Making and Productivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958)
- Middleton, Roger, 'Brittan on Britain: Decline, Declinism and the "Traumas of the 1970s"', in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. by Pat Thane, Hugh Pemberton, and Lawrence Black (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 69–95
- , 'The Political Economy of Decline', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), 573–86
- Morgan, Kenneth, *Britain since 1945 : The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Murden, Jon, "'All Those in Favour Say Aye" : Responses to Redundancy in the British Motor Industry, 1956', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 17 (2004), 75–110
- , 'Demands for Fair Wages and Pay Parity in the British Motor Industry in the 1960s and 1970s', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 20 (2005), 1–27
- Nijhuis, Dennie Oude, 'Explaining British Voluntarism', *Labor History*, 52 (2011), 373–98
- O'Hara, Glen, *Governing Post-War Britain : The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
- Passingham, Bernie, and Danny Connor, *Ford Shop Stewards on Industrial Democracy* (Nottingham: Institute for Workers' Control, 1977)
- Pelling, Henry, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)
- Phillips, Jim, 'Class and Industrial Relations in Britain : The "Long" Mid-Century and the Case of Port Transport, C. 1920-70', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16 (2005), 52–73
- Pimlott, Ben, and Chris Cook, eds., *Trade Unions in British Politics : The First 250 Years* (London: Longman, 1991)

- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, NY: Vintage books, 1979)
- Pollert, Anna, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (London: MacMillan, 1981)
- Portelli, Alessandro, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, 12 (1981), 96–107
- Posadas, J., *Les Soucoupes Volantes, Le Processus de la Matière et de l'Energie, la Science, la Lutte de Classes et Revolutionnaire et le Future Socialiste de l'Humanité* (Paris: Éditions Réed, 1968)
- Pugh, Martin, *Speak for Britain! : A New History of the Labour Party* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010)
- Ramdin, Ron, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1987)
- Rayton, Dwight, *Shop Floor Democracy in Action : A Personal Account of the Coventry Gang System* (Leeds: Industrial Common Ownership Movement, 1972)
- Reid, Alastair, *United We Stand : A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London: Penguin, 2005)
- , *The Tide of Democracy : Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain, 1870-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010)
- Rubinstein, David, *The Labour Party and British Society, 1880-2005* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2006)
- Sandbrook, Dominic, *State of Emergency : The Way We Were : Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010)
- Savage, Michael, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940 : The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)
- , 'Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 23–42
- , 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s : Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39/5 (2005), 929-946
- Scullion, Hugh, 'The Skilled Revolt against General Unionism: The Case of the BL Toolroom Committee', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 12 (1981), 15–27

- Seaton, Jean, 'Trade Unions and the Media', in *Trade Unions in British Politics: The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 256–73
- Seglow, Peter, and Patricia Wallace, *Trade Unions and Change in the British Car Industry* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1984)
- Sewell, Jr., William H., 'Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History', in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, ed. by Leonard R. Berlanstein (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press), pp. 15–38
- Shanks, Michael, *The Stagnant Society : A Warning* (Handsworth: Penguin, 1962)
- Shonfield, Andrew, *British Economic Policy since the War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958)
- Silver, Beverly, *Forces of Labor : Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)
- Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997)
- Stevens, Richard, 'Cold War Politics: Communism and Anti-Communism in the Trade Unions', in *The Post-War Compromise : British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 1, 1945-64*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell (London: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 168–91
- Stewart, Angus, *Theories of Power and Domination : The Politics of Empowerment in Late Modernity* (London: SAGE, 2001)
- Stewart, Paul, *We Sell Our Time No More : Workers' Struggles against Lean Production in the British Car Industry* (London: Pluto, 2009)
- Sweeney, Anne-Marie, 'Women Making Cars, Making Trouble, Making History', in *The Factory and the City : The Story of the Cowley Automobile Workers in Oxford*, ed. by Teresa Hayter and David Harvey (London: Mansell, 1993), pp. 116–39
- Taylor, Andrew J., 'The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism : Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 151–87

- Taylor, Robert, *The Fifth Estate : Britain's Unions in the Seventies* (London: Routledge, 1978)
- , 'The Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes', in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939-2000*, ed. by Harriet Jones and Paul Addison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 371–88
- , 'The Trade Union "Problem" in the Age of Consensus, 1960-79', in *Trade Unions in British Politics : The First 250 Years*, ed. by Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 173–99
- , *The Trade Union Question in British Politics : Government and Unions since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)
- Thompson, E.P., *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980)
- Thompson, Paul, 'Imagination and Passivity in Leisure: Coventry Car Workers and Their Families from the 1920s to the 1970s', in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century*, ed. by David Thoms, Len Holden, and Tim Claydon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 244–69
- , 'Playing at Being Skilled Men : Factory Culture and Pride in Work Skills among Coventry Car Workers', *Social History*, 13 (1988), 45–69
- Thornett, Alan, *From Militancy to Marxism : A Personal and Political Account of Organising Car Workers* (London: Left View, 1987)
- , *Militant Years : Car Workers' Struggles in Britain in the 60s and 70s* (London: Resistance Books, 2011)
- Tiratsoo, Nick, '"You"ve Never Had It so Bad': Britain in the 1970s', in *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain Since 1939*, ed. by Nick Tiratsoo (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997)
- Todd, Selina, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street : Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 501–18
- , *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010* (London: John Murray, 2014)
- Tolliday, Steven, 'Ford and "Fordism" in Postwar Britain : Enterprise Management and the Control of Labour, 1937-1987', in *The Power to Manage? : Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative Historical Perspective*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 81–114

- , 'Government, Employers and Shop Floor Organisation in the British Motor Industry 1939-69', in *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity, 1985), pp. 108–47
- , 'High Tide and after: Coventry's Engineering Workers and Shopfloor Bargaining, 1945-80', in *Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: The Experience of Coventry*, ed. by Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason (Coventry: Cryfield, 1986), pp. 204–39
- Tolliday, Steven, and Jonathan Zeitlin, eds., *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- , 'Shop-Floor Bargaining, Contract Unionism and Job Control: An Anglo-American Comparison', in *The Automobile Industry and its Workers: Between Fordism and Flexibility*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), pp. 99–120
- , eds., *The Power to Manage?: Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative Historical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1991)
- Tomlinson, Jim, 'Economic Growth, Economic Decline', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
- , 'The Government and the Car Industry, 1945-70', *Journal of Transport History*, 20 (1999), 17–29
- , *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2000)
- Turner, Alwyn W., *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008)
- Turner, H. A., Garfield Clack, and Geoffrey Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry: A Study of Industrial Unrest and an International Comparison* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967)
- Turner, John, 'Governors, Governance and Governed: British Politics since 1945', in *The British Isles since 1945*, ed. by Kathleen Burk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 19–61
- Virdee, Satnam, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

- Ward, Stephen, Ossie Stuart, and E. Swingedouw, 'Cowley in the Oxford Economy', in *The Factory and the City : The Story of the Cowley Automobile Workers in Oxford*, ed. by David Harvey and Teresa Hayter (London: Mansell, 1993), pp. 67–92
- Westwood, Sallie, *All Day, Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1984)
- Weller, Ken, *The BLSP Dispute: The Story of the Strike* (Whipsnade: Morse, 1962)
- , *Truth about Vauxhall* (Whipsnade: Morse, 1962)
- Weller, Ken, and Ernie Stanton, *What Happened at Fords* (Bromley: Solidarity, 1967)
- Whisler, Timothy R., *The British Motor Industry, 1945-1994 : A Case Study in Industrial Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)
- Willman, Paul, and Graham Winch, *Innovation and Management Control : Labour Relations at BL Cars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- Wrigley, Chris, *British Trade Unions since 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- , 'Introduction', in *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939-1979 : Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy*, ed. by Chris Wrigley (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 1–11
- , 'Women in the Labour Market and in the Unions', in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism: Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, Vol. 2, 1964-79*, ed. by Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman, and John McIlroy (Monmouth: Merlin, 2007), pp. 43–69
- Young, Stephen, and Neil Hood, *Chrysler UK : A Corporation in Transition* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1977)
- Zeitlin, Jonathan, 'The Emergence of Shop Steward Organization and Job Control in the British Car Industry : A Review Essay', *History Workshop*, 10 (1980), 119–37
- , 'Workplace Militancy: A Rejoinder', *History Workshop*, 16 (1983), 131–

### **Unpublished theses**

Gilmour, Alison Julia, 'Examining the "Hard-Boiled Bunch" : Work Culture and Industrial Relations at the Linwood Car Plant, C. 1963-1981'  
(unpublished doctoral thesis, Glasgow University, 2009)

Mills, Albert J., 'Worker Occupations, 1971-1975: A Sociohistorical Analysis of the Development and Spread of Sit-Ins, Work-Ins and Worker Co-Operatives in Britain' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham, 1982)